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D U R B A R

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# D U R B A R

*A NOVEL*

*By*

DENNIS KINCAID

LONDON

*CHATTO & WINDUS*

1933



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TO  
PAUL DE LASZLO  
WITH LOVE

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MORNING

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PART I

*MORNING*

THE Indian dawn comes very suddenly. One moment the world is dark and lifeless; silent save for the distant cry of a jackal, a demon laughing in the hills. The next moment comes a sudden stirring, a thrust and leap of life.

The towers of the city are black against an ashen sky, a faint purple smoke quavers above the murmuring streets. Dew is falling and the fields are sheeted with its filmy gauze. Troops of buffaloes coming down to drink at the river loom through the mist like primeval monsters. Washermen squat in long lines at the water's edge; you cannot see them, but the rhythmic thud-thud of wet cloth beaten against a rock re-echoes in the quiet air. In serried ranks the water-wheels are turning, turning; the plaint of creaking ropes and groaning wood.

Squadrons of green parrots sway and flutter in the corn, squawk and chortle, titter and scream; leap suddenly in the air with shrill maniac screams, deploying in a fan of glittering emerald. In the trees a few shrouded vultures

doze, crouching, hump-backed like old witch-women; but when at last the sunshine falls on them they flutter their tattered wings and stretch their cramped limbs, and now they seem—with their bald heads, red shining necks, white ruffs and folds of ermine feathers along their shoulders—like a company of decrepit Jacobean courtiers surprised by the sun after a night's debauch. From the shadow of a copse a peacock bugles amorously after his mate. He sails up from the undergrowth, screaming ecstatically, and flaps cumbrously above the trees, his long frothing train flowing darkly after him. As he rises slowly through the mist and comes out in the region of the sun, the light falls upon his plumage, upon its bronze brocades dappled with pale gold, its harmonies of colour as intricate as antique tapestry.

So in the town of Krishnagad opens the morning of the Dassera Durbar, the ancient festival of war and of death, now observed but as a faint memory of the tremendous days when Rajput and Maratha armies took the field, clashing sword upon shield and shouting the battle-cry "*Hurr! Hurr! Mahadev!*"

Though the sun had risen and the gardens of the town re-echoed with bulbuls and purple sun-

birds and the whole world seemed drenched with honied warmth, still in the deep gorge of the river a chill mist lingered in the shadow of tall temples and enormous trees, so that the sun shone dimly like the mask of some Sumerian god peering vengefully through fumes of incense.

Far down ran the river, swirling round sand-banks, rippling over parapets of blue-shining pebbles ; and mirrored in its pools were the grey pylons of old weed-rustling shrines, on whose moss-grown walls white pigeons brooded like fading magnolia petals.

The mist drifted vaguely over the river in white rolling waves, and with each ebb and flow, altars, domes and pillars towered in flower-wreathed majesty or receded into obscure gloom.

Somewhere flames crackled over dry firewood. An acid tang of burning dung made one's eyes water. Presently the soft caress of incense stole down the air. In the *Naubat khana* above a temple-gateway drums began to beat, huge booming gourds and tiptoe-pattering kettle-drums. A trumpet blared in the darkness of an inner shrine and pipes wailed in a savage, lilt-ing refrain.

The voice of a young priest rose, chanting the Bhairavi Rag, the morning hymn. From the swoon of night are we delivered, from the

dominion of Yama, King of Terrors. In the depth of the forest and in the height of heaven the pulse of the Creator throbs again.

Above the thinning mist a little statue of Krishna stood cross-legged in the posture of a dancer, playing upon a flute. The sun fell in an aureole of rosy gold upon the god's uplifted face; and, as though awakening in the warmth, the face stirred with a tender smile as the lips breathed music on the bamboo flute. Intoxicated with his own elfin strains, the dark hero-king, lover and ruler of mankind, danced with jewelled feet upon a yellow water-lily, Krishna Padampad, the lotus-footed god. Increasing sunlight rippled over the curving bronze, over the sleek contours of arm or thigh and the jutting luxuriance of brocaded robes and heavily looped necklaces. The softly smiling face, with dimpled cheeks and long appealing eyes, seemed almost to move, to nod and beckon, as the slender fingers ran along the flute; and the air was sweet with his song. For the world's rhythm is but the dance of God, Who treads out the pattern of the wheeling stars, and the endless cycles of recurring time, till at the last He shall weary of His play and the worlds crumble back to the nothingness from which His music had first summoned them.

The music of the Morning Hymn ceased, its echoes died away into a spidery silence.

Two young, bare-chested acolytes, plump and gelded, bowing yellow-shaven heads and walking softly in shirts of rustling silk, stepped backward from the gateway of the temple. Behind them came a very old man, barefooted, clad only in a loin-cloth, with a leopard-skin about his shoulders. A scarlet umbrella fringed with swaying tassels nodded above his head. His little craning face was wrinkled and shrivelled like a monkey's; his arms were shrunk, inhumanly emaciated; his cheeks were hollows and his eyes circles of glowing darkness.

It was the *gosain*, the High Priest of Krishna, descending for his morning's ablutions.

He was followed by a double line of priests—those on the right, the male priests, bare-chested, sleek with perfumed oil, their loins swathed with silk; those on the left, the eunuch-priests, robed as women, representing the Gopi girls whom Krishna loved, and symbolising by their promiscuous couplings with male devotees the ecstasy of union with the Divine.

Supported, half carried by his acolytes, the *gosain* stumbled from step to step down the long wide stairway that led to the water. On the last step he stopped, straightened himself and

turned, lifting up a trembling blue-veined hand. The others looked about them vaguely. At first they heard nothing but the melancholy lament of the water-wheels, the dull thud-thud of the washermen's clouts and the gentle murmur of the stream. But presently they caught the patter of sandals. A young soldier came running down the precipitous bank, vaulted over the stone balustrade of the temple stairway. Pausing for a moment to remove his sandals, he bent and touched the ground in front of the old man.

*"Salam, Gosain Maharaj."*

"Well, my son, is all prepared?"

"We are quite ready, father. The Princess Indira only awaits your final decision. Are the omens favourable for to-day?"

The bent and wrinkled head nodded slowly.

"To-day is a fortunate, a smiling day. All omens are good. At all costs it must be to-day. To-morrow is Saturday, sacred to the planet Saturn, an inauspicious and crooked day."

He turned and stared unblinking at the glowing shield of the sun. Now the old times will return again. We shall have a Princess, obedient to the priests, solicitous for the faith. The former splendour of the Aryan religion restored. . . . She is old, old. But she can adopt a son—one whom the priests have trained. . . .

Beside him the eunuchs clustered, their pale protruding eyes fixed on his wrinkled countenance. They did not understand the short colloquy between the soldier and their *gosain*. Their flat smooth faces were innocent of any expression or emotion. They stood silent by the rilling stream.

From the city came a sudden roar of drums and clangour of trumpets. The Raja's band thus signalled to the world from the palace tower that the Prince had awoken.



A mile to the east of the city was a long low bungalow, a rectangular barrack of red brick fronted with a spacious Doric-pillared verandah. This was the British Residency.

On either side of the outer gateway were the quarters of the Resident's guard. As the mist of dawn cleared and the gongs and trumpets of the temples hailed the risen sun, the Maratha soldiers came slouching out, rubbing drowsy eyes, patting down touselled hair and tying khaki turbans. They squatted down on their heels, blinking up at the sky. Each had a little brass water-pot; and soon they began their ablutions, rinsing their nostrils, gargling, brushing their teeth with frayed twigs of the Nim-tree.



Along the garden paths the gardeners swept busily with tattered brooms, crying out encouragement and officious advice to each other. A water-carrier pattered off to fetch water for the Resident Saheb's bath from the tank at the bottom of the garden. He carried, slung across his shoulders, two large earthen jars depending from a bamboo pole.

In the verandah of the Residency servants were shaking out the mats, dusting the basket chairs. Presently the butler, bearded, patriarchal, tunic in spotless white, emerged from the interior of the house, walking slowly and with ponderous dignity. He carried level with his chest a tea-tray, and his face had the expression of the protagonist in some religious drama. He strutted down the verandah, his bare feet patting upon the tiled floor. When he came to the Saheb's bedroom at the far end of the verandah he swung round with military precision and entered the darkened, shuttered room.

He laid the tea-tray softly on the table between the two iron bedsteads, and turning to the bed on the right said softly, "Good morning, Madam Saheb."

Mrs. Hilton made a faint noise to show that she heard him, and he lifted the mosquito-

curtains and looped them over the tall iron bedposts.

He then turned to the left.

"Good morning, Saheb."

"Heugh?"

"Nice morning, Saheb."

"Whasthat? Oh yes. Right-ho." A yawn, and the Resident sat up, rubbing his eyes as the butler raised the mosquito-curtains. He turned to his wife.

"Morning, dear; did you sleep well?"

"Not badly, George. And you?"

"Like a top."

"Always do, don't you?"

"Not always, dear. Generally—h'm—generally. You didn't sleep as well as usual?"

"I woke up two or three times. There was a jackal yowling away all night and it kept disturbing me. And then some wild cats started spitting and screaming."

"Really? Really! Cats. H'm. Must get my shot-gun out."

Mrs. Hilton had wrapped a dressing-gown round her shoulders and fitted a blue-ribboned boudoir-cap over her short hair. She sat up and began pouring out tea. Lovely, fragrant tea. She bent over her cup, sniffing a delicious aroma. The very smell refreshes you.

"Toast, George?"

"Thank you, my dear. Any letters?"

"Bills. Advertisements. A sales' catalogue from Whiteaways. Yes; and two letters for you."

"Ha. Let's see." He wiped buttery fingers on his napkin. "Oh, they're nothing much. One from Grindlay's about my boxes they're storing, and the other's a notice from the Yacht Club in Bombay. Damned disappointing. Never seem to get any letters nowadays."

"No. . . ."

Mrs. Hilton peeled a green orange. The butler had put as usual a spray of champak-blossom by her plate and she tucked this into the lace collar of her dressing-gown.

"That Durbar to-day," said the Resident, putting down his cup with a clatter. "Damn. I hate wearing my Durbar uniform. It's too infernally tight. . . . It's going to be a hot day, too."

"Yes," she sighed. The delicate china-blue of the sky was already hardening to a steely glaze.

"And there's the garden party in the evening, curse it. Ah well, well. Any more tea, dear?"

She poured hot water into the teapot.

"An orange, George?"

"Thank you, my dear." He pressed his thumb-

nail into the rind and the green skin split, peeling softly apart.

They heard the water-carrier stumbling into the bathroom, his earthen jars clunking against the wall. The water drummed dully into a tin bath-tub.

The Resident sprang out of bed, collected his shaving things and stumped into the bathroom. Through the closed door his voice came muffled. "Put some more cold water in, you donkey. This is scalding."

Now he was stropping his razor—flick-flack, flick-flack—the steel seeping over the sleek leather.

Mrs. Hilton turned on her side. Yes, it was going to be hot. . . . A fine show those bougainvilleas made along the verandah railing. Two blossom-head parrots sailed past the open door. A bulbul fluttered in the eaves, uttering his delicious bell-like note.

The Resident began to sing in his bath. The tin tub creaked and bulged. He splashed water over his head with an enamel mug.

"Half a moon is better than no moon," he intoned. "Better than no moon, better than—hang it, how does it go on?"

The bulbul dropped from the eaves and perched on the verandah railing, bent his

crested head and sang a few bars. Then he hopped round and, lifting his tail, displayed his scarlet rump as though in derision.

Mrs. Hilton slipped out of bed, thrust her feet into Indian slippers and walked over to the verandah. The garden looks nicer at this time than at any other. It's the faint mist, like a bloom over everything. Those rust-red clusters of goldmohur blossom are like heavy lanterns swinging. Lovely the champak-trees; the flowers white-petalled, with centres of glowing gold; and the branches round and sleek like the limbs of an animal; a back of donkey's hide, elephant's hide, pouched and smooth, vapour-misted gun-metal. Those Passion-flowers must be cut away from the verandah. Their scent is too strong. Pleasant enough in the cool morning, exotic and sweet, reminding you of all sorts of rich caressing things; but too heavy on hot evenings—ugh! sickly and unclean.

She went in for her bath. The tin bath-tub brimmed with brown water. Soft brown rain-water from the tank, smelling of iris-leaves. She sprinkled a handful of bath salts. The blunt crystals spun slowly down, clinked against the bottom. Tiny puffs of grey smoke spurted, crept up sluggishly in widening coils. She climbed in, the water rising over the edge, clopping upon

the tiles, and sat cross-legged, the tin sides cold against her knees. Her legs glimmering through the brown water were pale mushroom colour.



The Raja, Prince Shahu, turned over on his back and gazed at the ceiling.

The bed was lumpy and uncomfortable. He was always meaning to speak about it and have a new mattress put in, or something done about it. But it was difficult to get anything done nowadays. The servants were so lethargic and disobedient.

. . . But I never can remember; can't remember anything. He put his hand up to his forehead. Always that aching pain behind his eyes, and the terrible effort even to think. It was like finding one's way through the mist and cobweb-patterned undergrowth of a nightmare forest, with shadowy guides beckoning vaguely ahead.

. . . I shall speak to the Minister about it.

It always ended like that. "Oh, Nana Saheb, will you see that my servants do so-and-so for me?" The lean old Brahman would let his heavy eyelids half-fall over his yellow eyes and smile discreetly.

Was he laughing at you? You never knew.

Just that quiet inward smile, the slight inclination of the head, and the dull gleam of opaque agate eyes.

The servants were terrified of Nana Saheb. God knows what he did to them, but they would tremble as soon as the long shaven head swung slowly in their direction and the hard eyes fixed unwaveringly on their faces.

. . . Whereas if I speak to them, they say 'yes', and run off and I never see them again, not for days, till I have forgotten what I told them to do. Hiding somewhere in this awful palace. Somewhere in those endless winding corridors.

The mosquito-curtains had been drawn and four or five bewildered bugs ran nervously over the folds, disappearing at last into the blowsy, flock-furred hangings at the head of the bed. Already the flies were abroad, a grey network of them rising and falling in the air. Lizards flicked along the peeling walls.

It will be hot to-day. And with a sigh he turned over and lay gazing at the cracks and markings on the yellow walls. Ever since he was a baby he had loved to weave pictures out of those confused and tortuous lines. That oblong of perpendicular scratches, it was a bristling rank of spears, a phalanx of Mogul infantry; and here, where the wall had cracked into

whorls of flaking plaster, was the dust of the Maratha charge. A flat, blue-shimmering tick ran out of a crack. He squeezed it with the back of his thumb and smiled to see the tiny splash of blood.

He heard a rustle in the room and, turning, found his favourite singing-boy squatting by the bed.

"What is it, child? I don't want you now"—for the boy's duty was to stay in his room all night, so that if the Raja awoke and felt nervous in the dark, or started up out of a bad dream, he might sing to soothe him.

"Nothing, Maharaj. I have done my ablutions and have now come back here." But his narrow face was puckered up into an expression of concern, and Shahu knew that the child was afraid. Fear is very contagious.

"What is it? Why are you afraid?"

The boy gulped.

"Have mercy, Maharaj . . ."

"Yes, yes, only tell me."

"Maharaj, in the bazaar there is a whisper of a plot . . ." He broke off and burst into a fit of hysterical sobbing.

"Stop! Stop it!" Shahu almost screamed. "Please go. Go at once. If you have bad news, tell Nana Saheb. Tell him now, immediately.



He is the Minister. It is his business. I will not be worried. You have made me ill." He was trembling with agitation and rage.

The boy flung himself on the floor.

"Have pity, Maharaj."

"Yes, yes—but go. Go! Go!"

He sank back on the heaped cushions, gasping, trembling, wet with sudden sweat.

. . . I oughtn't to have let the boy escape free like that. He should have been whipped, whipped. Bursting into my room to scream out some story he'd heard in the bazaar. Oh, I have many enemies, not a doubt of it. One must be very careful. But the guards are loyal and I have all my food tested.

Ah, that was a dreadful thing, that story of a plot. People shouldn't talk like that even in jest—it is too horrible. And of course it was all a jest. Nana Saheb is so clever. He'd always find out and prevent anything like that happening. . . . And the British Resident. He can wire for thousands of British troops. With machine-guns. Then I'll be safe. Oh, if there's ever any trouble I shall get away to the Residency and then there'll be shooting. I'll stand on the roof of the Residency and watch the crowds crumpling up under the machine-guns. And he began to laugh, lying there on his back shaking like a

jelly-fish. He could almost hear the shrieks and smell the odour of carnage.

. . . But, of course, we Marathas were great soldiers in the old days. And he began to think of his father, that enormous giant, six-foot seven in height, weighing twenty-eight stones.

What a terrifying person he was, with his vast bulk and great red fists, and the huge roar of laughter that shook the room, and even louder roars of rage, when he stamped and stormed and smashed crockery and tore the carpets to shreds with his hands.

Yet people had loved him for all his brutality and violence. They loved him for the very coarseness that made simpering courtiers blush. They laughed when he relieved himself in open Durbar without even turning aside. They adored the reckless courage with which he would pursue a panther on foot and alone, kill it with one blow of his short hunting-spear.

An extraordinary sight in his torn and soiled clothes, ropes of priceless jewels carelessly wound about his neck. You would see him striding down the bazaar, elbowing his way through the crowd and swinging his huge fists, bellowing abuse at any that stood in his way, stopping suddenly to listen to the endless grievances of some whining widow, or bumping and rattling

over the cobbles in a villainous old Ford, the same Ford he used to take to Delhi for the meetings of the Chamber of Princes.

Of course, it became something of a pose, that spectacular shabbiness. It amused him, one of the wealthiest princes in India, to shame the ostentatious show of petty chieftains. And he soon learnt that the English officials were tickled by his genial clowning, so that he often by pure buffoonery got his way in matters in which the subtlest diplomacy would have been wasted. The childish grin, the roars of laughter and the purposely quaint English phrases distracted attention from those shrewd eyes.

Often when he had asked an English functionary to a big display of camel-fights and elephant-fights in his own arena, though he pretended to roar and cheer and applaud with all the enthusiasm of the mob, to laugh with excitement as the blood flowed and the unhappy creatures crumpled up on the steaming sand, to shriek with sadistic frenzy at the sight of torn flesh and reeking guts, and though indeed the stench and roar of the arena were a delicious stimulant to his jaded appetite, yet all the while he would be carefully watching his honoured guest, peering sideways at him from under the red shadow cast by the umbrellas of state and

the nodding horse-tail fans, and every now and then insinuating a cautious phrase, an apparently innocent suggestion, preparing the way for his eventual request.

When the Great War broke out he had fallen into paroxysms of martial ardour, had offered his very competent little army for immediate service and begged to be allowed to accompany them into action. The latter offer had been declined, the State Army had been drafted to Iraq and was besieged with the British forces in Kut.

The old man spent nights of sleepless agony grieving over the fate of his soldiers. In the mornings he would rise early and hunt alone for hours, returning to send wild telegrams to the Viceroy. "Send me to Kut. My Marathas will never yield when I am with them." And when the final surrender was announced he was like a man possessed. No one dared go near him. They listened anxiously at the door of his room and heard him roaring like an animal in pain.

He had never really recovered from that shock; had passed into an uneasy decline, solaced in his declining years by the wit of his favourite Rani, Princess Indira. Ugly, malicious and impudent, that extraordinary woman had

charmed him with her daring and spirit. She rode a horse as well as a man, went pig-sticking with the English officers, played polo and went panther-spearing. Cynical, cruel and ambitious, he knew her, but only she could amuse and distract him as his gloom deepened. But he had never yielded to her requests concerning the actual administration of the State.

Once there had been a poisoning . . . and he had suspected her and warned her that if there were any more mysterious deaths in the palace he would have her hanged.

Vainly she had besought him to dispense with Nana Saheb. She mocked at the Brahman, deriding his superstitions, his secrecy, his egotism. She imitated his stealthy walk and his purring voice. And the old man rocked with laughter; but when her voice changed and she flung herself across his knees and wept and begged him to dismiss the Minister, he would pat her shoulders and stroke her hair but never answer.

When he lay dying she had knelt beside him imploring, her eyes red with weeping, her voice harsh and bitter. He closed his eyes as though weary. She took him by the shoulders and would have shaken him in her rage and despair. But the curtains of the room parted and Nana Saheb came in, barefooted, noiseless as a cat,

his long Amenhotep head gleaming like amber in the torchlight. The old man opened his eyes and saw Indira and Nana Saheb facing each other over his body. He gave a sudden chuckle and died.

Shahu had always been frightened of his enormous, overpowering father.

He involuntarily shrank away from his huge animal vitality. He would crouch against the wall when the old man came suddenly down the passages, howling abuse at one servant, cuffing another, coarsely chaffing a salaaming courtier, patting the cheek of some handsome young guardsman who sprang to the salute in the doorway.

Sometimes his father would notice him flattened against the wall and bellow: "What are you doing there, eh? Ought to be outside riding or hunting. Eh? Get your rifle and shoot me a panther by this evening. Ach, don't tremble like that. No one would know you were a Maratha, a Kshatriya and the son of a king." And the great red hand would descend on his shoulder in what was intended to be a reassuring pat, but what in fact seemed to Shahu a startling buffet. He would force a weak smile and gulp, "Yes, Father," and the gorilla-like

creature would trudge noisily down the passage, shouting and roaring, blowing his nose in his fingers, wiping the sweat from his brow with a square of priceless fabric, wheezing and coughing and laughing.

After his mother's death Shahu was sent to school in Bombay. Officially she died of influenza, but people whispered. Princess Indira was jealous of her. And since Indira had no son of her own it was better for Shahu to be out of the way. The Minister, Nana Saheb, had arranged for his schooling, and had later suggested that Shahu be sent to finish his education in England.

And so Shahu had been boarded with a retired Colonel at "Dulce Domum", Kipling Road, Wimbledon, to study the vagaries of English etiquette. He was almost as frightened of the Colonel as he had been of his father, but he tried hard to earn the former's gruff commendation. He learnt by heart the principal English victories in India with their dates and the names of the English commanders, could soon repeat without a mistake the regiments of the British Army, and used to help the Colonel to haul up a Union Jack on the flagstaff in the centre of the little lawn to celebrate Empire Day or St. George's Day. He was taken to London, shown

over the Tower, bade wonder at the Duke's tomb in St. Paul's, and set for a few reverent minutes before the statues of Havelock, Napier and Outram in Trafalgar Square. And when his initiation into English life was considered complete he went up to Oxford.

The first few days at Christ Church he had been tearfully shy of all the strange, well-dressed young men, so pink-and-white and sleek, with their odd expressions and quite unintelligible jokes. But gradually he made a few acquaintances. . . . Dons asked him to breakfast with other freshers; inquisitive snobs came sniffing round the son of a ruling prince.

His father had always made him a generous allowance, but he had gathered from the Colonel's conversation that only very vulgar and unpatriotic people were rich, and he had hardly regarded the mounting sums at his bank. Now he suddenly discovered the intoxicating pleasures of wealth in the West. He bought a Sunbeam and had a chauffeur to drive it. He had his rooms refurnished and decorated with exuberant cretonnes. At the first introduction he asked people to lunch and gave them champagne-cup, caviar and Lobster Newburg.

He soon had friends in plenty. They petted the sensitive little Oriental and he clung



pathetically to them. They were all splendid chaps, he thought, and lay awake thinking out new ways of treating them. "I must get up a party to go over to Maidenhead for lunch. I think they'd like that. What fun it will be!" But when they occasionally invited him in return he was in transports of gratitude. "Oh, I say, it is good of you. I say, do come back to my room. I've got some jolly good new champagne in. And have you seen my new gramophone? It was damned expensive, I can tell you. And I bought a dozen records straight off, just like that. Oh, and I've got some lovely new shirts. You should come and look. I say, let's go out to Godstowe this evening. You know, I do so like that Trout Inn. You do, too, don't you?" He squeezed his friend's arm, longing to hear from him a sympathetic enthusiasm. And the long pipe would come out for a moment and the slow drawl answer, "Yes, it's a goodish spot. Specially in the summer. Garden's so damned pretty."

"And the beer's awfully good," Shahu would persist.

"Oh, not bad. The old woman doesn't water it like some of the pubs do."

"But don't you like Godstowe then?" Shahu would quaver, looking so crestfallen that his

other friends would slap him on the back and take him by the arm and cry, "Of course we do. It's the divinest place. Harry's so damn supercilious."

So for a couple of years Shahu was ecstatically happy. But when he went down he found it increasingly difficult to keep up with his Oxford friends. They had to work in London and were seldom free; or stayed at their country-houses, and if they remembered to ask Shahu for a week-end he was ill-at-ease in that formal atmosphere.

He drifted rather miserably back to India, took a suite at the Taj Hotel in Bombay, spent money at the Turf Club and drove wearily about in expensive Hispanos.

Then suddenly his father died and he returned to the State in response to a telegram from Nana Saheb, the Minister. In the city, where as a child he had flitted nervously, only anxious to avoid the notice of his father, he was greeted by salaaming multitudes, bazaars that rose at his approach and a salute of nineteen guns.

He had confirmed his father's officials in their appointments. Nana Saheb remained Minister.

At first he had taken a languid interest in State affairs, requiring all papers to be brought

to him for signature; but when he found his desk snowed under with piles and piles of official correspondence, ranging in subject from an extradition dispute with Indore State to a financial squabble between the hermaphrodite priests of the Ambabai Temple—while Nana Saheb stood beside him explaining in his soft dispassionate voice the tortuous intricacies of each question, and at the end of each exposition bowing his head and waiting silently for the Raja to announce his decision—then Shahu would become childishly irritated and with almost a sob in his voice would say, “Oh, I don’t know. What’s usually done in these cases? What did my father do? What do you advise? Oh, for God’s sake, say *something*!”

And the old Brahman would reply, looking at him steadily with his hard agate eyes.

“Maharaj, I would respectfully beg to submit that (if your Highness permitted me) I should draft a reply to the Durbar<sup>1</sup> of His Highness of Indore. I would then bring this draft for your approval, and if you were graciously pleased to concur with my view you might then sign the document.”

<sup>1</sup> Durbar in a Native State means not only an official reception or public audience, but also the actual administration of the Raja.

So very soon Shahu's transaction of business became the automatic signing of the few papers Nana Saheb considered it necessary to show him. And even this after a while became irksome—since he was always tortured by the fear that Nana Saheb was laughing at him as he busily signed away these documents which he no longer pretended to understand.

He went to Bombay for the cold weather season, and on his return never asked to see the official correspondence.

Only once had there been a dispute between him and the Minister—and that was over the treatment to be accorded to the Princess Indira, his father's favourite.

She was old now, and ugly, hook-nosed and pitted with smallpox. The charm and wit that had enchanted the old Raja had faded with time. Only her restless ambition remained.

"She is," murmured Nana Saheb, "if your Highness will forgive my impertinence, a very troublesome woman. She was no friend to your Highness' mother, if I may venture to say so—and I think your Highness is aware of that . . . and to what I am particularly referring. . . . She is childless now, which is fortunate, but she may yet have a child. . . ."

"How could she?"

"Wicked men, whom of course I do not believe, say that she has taken a lover. . . . This is really very shameful."

"What are you driving at, Nana Saheb?"

A slow bow, a steady stare and a sudden ironical twist of the lips. "Great care should be taken that she does no mischief, Maharaj."

"What do you suggest?"

The Brahman shrugged his shoulders and stared out of the window.

"Nana Saheb, Nana Saheb, what do you mean?" his voice trembled.

"Nothing. I have forgotten, Maharaj. Forgive me."

But Shahu knew what he had been hinting at.

"You don't mean murder her?"

Nana Saheb became confused, coughed, blew his nose on his silken shawl. When he collected himself he replied vaguely, "What a pity that the old custom of *sati* has been abolished by the British! Many superfluous princesses . . . they went willingly to the flame . . . or if not willingly then drugged with opium. . . . Ah well, this is the Kala Yug, the iron age of evil. . . ."

But beyond sending a message to Princess Indira to leave the Palace, Shahu took no

action against her. He was relieved when he heard that she had settled down in an old building known as the Water Palace, apparently resigned to her powerless widowhood.

Sometimes he passed her in the streets of the city, he in his yellow Hispano and she in a low barouche drawn by four black horses; and they would pass by in the wide street without looking at each other, she staring straight ahead, a bitter smile curving her thin lips, and he staring downwards, his heart throbbing with a sudden panic.

“ . . . Why have I always been so frightened of her?” he sometimes asked himself. “She is weak and helpless now. I could order her to leave the State. I could imprison her. And yet, whenever I think of her I feel afraid.”

She had been so dominating an influence in the palace during the impressionable years of his childhood. He had often seen her beside his terrifying father, and she had teased him with faint but crushing contempt. And then there had been his mother's death. . . .

Once out driving he had met her in a narrow street where there was no room for two to pass, and he had given way to her. Was it the compulsion of his acquired English manners or a sudden stupefaction of fear ?

Sometimes he had longed to effect some com-

promise with the indomitable old creature. His simple nature hated this atmosphere of hostility and expectancy. But all his advances were rejected and he lacked the will-power to decide on her destruction. Presently the very thought of her became an intolerable irritation to him and he hated her name being mentioned. Occasionally Nana Saheb would talk in a far-away voice about scheming old princesses in general, but Shahu would fly into a temper, thrust his fingers in his ears and cry, "I won't listen; be quiet."

On that first cold weather of his reign he had gone to Bombay and had taken a bungalow for the season. He was much sought after by the younger set of the rich Bombay merchants; and he allowed himself to be flattered into giving extravagant dinners and supper parties at Juhu, and dances at the Taj.

And then he met his future wife. She was the daughter of a rich Maratha merchant, Sir Mahadev Gatke. He saw her first at a *Thé Dansant* at the Hardinge Club, and had been enchanted by a sudden glimpse of a little wheat-coloured face framed in green and gold. They were introduced, and he found she spoke perfect English, was animated and amusing. He had

met few women in England and had been painfully shy with them. The women of his own rank and family in India were seldom literate, could never speak a word of English and had little in common with him. Long pale women, perfectly bred and perfectly lifeless, without a laugh, a smile or a tear. They performed without a fault their part in the intricate ballet of court etiquette. The very jewels and robes that they wore were never their own but were the hereditary costumes and panoply, handed down from generation to generation, each prescribed for a particular actor in the gorgeous mime. They died young and were forgotten and hoped for no after-life. They had fulfilled themselves if they brought into the world a man-child, a descendant of the Sun God.

. . . Of course Princess Indira was different. She was alive enough. But she is old now, moping alone in her little house. Or plotting, as Nana Saheb says? But I mustn't think of her. Let me not think of her. . . .

How proud he had been of his little wife! Usha, her name was, spirit of the dawn. He brought her to Krishnagad; they were married with the traditional splendour, and she was installed as Rani.



They had played tennis together, and gone riding in the cool mornings.

. . . Why, that was only a few years ago. How things have changed! My Oxford friends would hardly recognise me now. They used to laugh at me and say, "You'll soon become a huge Raja, broader than you're long." I'm not as fat as that. But I never feel well. Always this headache and the effort to move, even to think.

In the hot weather the heat was like an evil spell. By the palace darkness and clinging cobwebs, continual whispering that strained one's nerves, sudden fears that beset one in that huge horrible place, swiftly his vitality and youth had drained away. Often he wondered dimly how he could ever have been so happy and gay. Two or three years ago the symptoms had started. What illness was it? Once he had heard the servants whispering over it in a corner of the passage. One of them had said, "The Raja Saheb's grandfather became insane too." Or was it poison? But poison would kill at once. You shout and scream and writhe. Like his mother. . . . He had just begun to tire very quickly, to awake with a drowsy headache, to find it harder and harder to follow even the simplest conversation of more than a few minutes. His attention would stray to a butterfly

fluttering in the window, or a fly buzzing about the room. Sometimes he would break off in the middle of a sentence, too weary and too bored to continue; and when he shook himself together and tried to get his mind into focus, he would notice his wife staring at him with eyes of horror. This upset him; he became nervous of her sharp glances, her questions, her obvious anxiety. Though he still loved her, and liked to lie for hours motionless in her arms, he found her restless and disquieting, and the piercing stare of her wide eyes alarmed him. Less and less did he enjoy seeing her, and in a shy, self-conscious way he began to fill up a harem with mute, beautiful creatures who did not bother him and satisfied his physical needs almost mechanically. Nowadays he had little interest in life save food, a comfortable woman for the afternoon, a skilful masseur and the inevitable opium.

He lay there on his lumpy, blowsy bed, with its stained curtains and green eider-down oozing clammy flock, and stared at the cracks and scrapes in the wall. . . . That Durbar to-day. Oh, well, I suppose I'll have to be getting up soon. Nana Saheb will be here soon, urging me to hurry in that respectful, patient voice.

He began to perform the ritual enjoined on every Hindu on his rising at dawn.

He gazed at the palms of his hands which are sacred to the Goddess Laxmi and repeated the traditional prayer to her. He then bowed to the floor, worshipping the Earth Goddess, begging to be forgiven for treading on her sacred form throughout that day.

He had just shuffled into his red slippers when there was a clatter outside the door, a rifle-butt rang on the marble floor of the corridor, and a mop-headed servant ran in saying, "Nana Saheb."

"Well, bring my tea," Shahu snapped. "Yes, yes; I'll see Nana Saheb now. But I want my tea."

"Tea all ready now, Maharaj," said the servant. But both of them knew this was untrue.

"But I want it immediately—don't you understand?" his shrill, childish voice rose petulantly.

"Yes, Maharaj, the kettle is just boiling now. Tray is all laid; cup, saucer, plate, everything. Just we pour hot water into teapot. . . ." He was still gabbling the formula of postponement, when the curtain over the door swung aside and the Minister came in, walking silently on bare feet.

The servant shrank back against the wall.

"Well, well, bring the tea," Shahu shouted.

The Brahman turned his long head towards the servant and his yellow eyes glared. With a long bony finger he pointed at the man, and he bowed and ran trembling from the room. The Brahman opened his mouth in a soundless laugh, exposing toothless gums, and then as though recollecting himself, lifted the gold fringe of his shawl and wiped his narrow lips.

He bowed deeply to Shahu with a murmured, "Salaam, Maharaj."

"Yes, Nana Saheb, what is it?"

"Your Highness has not forgotten the Durbar in honour of the Dassera festival?"

"No, Nana Saheb."

"And first your Highness is required to be at the palace chapel to worship the sacred sword, the sword of your divine ancestors."

"Yes, Nana Saheb. I'll come as soon as I've had my tea."

"Then I may be permitted to await your Highness outside your Highness' room?" as the servant came running back, glancing nervously at Nana Saheb, carrying a tray which he set on the low table by the window.

Shahu sat down and poured out tea. The palace chapel. That endless sword-worshipping ceremony. It was the sword that had driven the Mussulman from Krishnagad. We Marathas in

the old days. . . . The chapel was in the very centre of the vast labyrinth of the palace. You went down endless winding corridors, with mirrors set at the corners so that you could see that no one lay in wait for you. And all down these passages were these awful clockwork statues that Shahu's grandfather had designed (the grandfather who had been deposed for the atrocious murder of a dancing-girl and who had amused his declining years by torturing horses, having them tied down and trampled by elephants)—statues of Lion-Men, that moved their arms by clockwork and nodded—ugh! horribly uncanny in the long dark corridors.

But the tea was refreshing. He sipped it and lay back in his chair. He could see the city spread out at his feet. A faint mist powdered the red roofs. Green pigeons wheeled slowly in a cloudless sky. Beyond the city walls, fields of wheat rippled under an occasional breeze, opening canyons of metallic green under the crust of saffron corn.

In the garden at his feet the champak-trees were in blossom and the air was heavy with their piercing scent. But in the path along the palace wall lay the carcase of a she-buffalo. It had died of some unclean disease and the servants would not touch it. Already the vultures

had found it and clustered upon the carcase, shivering with excitement, gobbling and squawking, so that the whole mass seemed to seethe and boil like an emblem of corruption.



From a distance the palace was imposing, an amorphous mass of towers, domes and turrets, with a façade of biscuit-brick Butterworth Gothic. This last had been erected at the order of Shahu's grandfather, who wedded to his Neronian lust and cruelty a Neronian dilettantism. In regularly spaced apertures along this façade were inlet his most vaunted treasures—a series of pre-Raphaelite stained-glass windows commissioned from England in the seventies of the last century. In these windows the Raja's ancestors, from divine legendary heroes of the Epic Age down to eighteenth-century bandits and Heliogabali, were represented standing meekly in fields of Madonna lilies, hands clasped over Galahad swords, swathed in shapeless surplices of Liberty silk.

Behind the façade lay the reception rooms, whose furnishing was a medley of the disordered tastes of three successive rulers. The grandfather's rocking-chairs, beaded cushions and

Louis-Philippe fauteuils still fraternally companioned the elaborate deck-chairs and arty garden-seats and musical-boxes of Shahu's father—while Shahu's contribution was a set of English smoking-room chairs, which the servants used to enjoy trundling to and fro on their squeaky castors, scarring deep canals in the incredibly valuable carpets. Upon the mantelpiece and upon the various occasional tables were set countless clocks, of which few were working and even those with no attempt at synchronisation. Several cheap clockwork toys, a broken lacquer swing, two or three saddles, lay jumbled in a corner. On the walls a few masterpieces of Rajput art (a young prince riding a piebald pony, while overhead the blossoming fruit-trees foamed in the gilded sky and the flowers under-foot untwined sinuous petals) were hung crookedly on loops of frayed and knotted string beside old calendars and advertisements of Pompeian beauty-cream and Palmolive school-girls and sports photos from the *Daily Mirror* attached to the wall by rusted tin-tacks.

Behind the reception rooms stretched the labyrinths of the original ancient buildings, a maze of tortuous passages ending abruptly in dusty refuse-stinking angles against the outer

walls, or in dark courtyards dedicated to some god whose red-daubed image postured beneath a deciduous pipal-tree. Wastes of empty rooms full of garbage and rotting woodwork alternated with rooms crowded to suffocation with servants, clients, hangers-on; sacred eunuchs with whom the devout were enjoined by religious usage to practise sodomy at certain festivals; slave-women pining with unsatisfied desire, or sick with envy of their more fortunate sisters who enjoyed what was known as a Virginity Pension, the reward for those slave-women whose charm had made them the object of the first sexual experience of a Prince of the Blood on his attaining puberty.

A final touch of eerie melodrama was added by the grotesque clockwork statues of Lion-Men, those unpleasant toys of Shahu's grandfather (in whose disordered mind probably lingered some memories of the appalling cult of Vishnu Narasimha the Lion Incarnation)—pathetic shabby creatures they looked in their gaudy tinselled robes, holding toy swords in yellow claws—but their eyes, which closer scrutiny revealed to be but yellow glass, yet as you turned away seemed by some alchemy of quickening light to waken suddenly with lambent flame and to glitter hungrily in the gloom.



Beyond the palace chapel were the quarters of the Rani, her own little room surrounded by innumerable cells where slept her servants and slaves. Here the murmur of the outer world came but faintly—the wailing of priests in the chapel, occasional tramp of a sentry on the walls. Mosquitoes hung thickly over the flaking plaster, bats rustled among the beams, and large brown rats padded softly over the carpet of dust.

The Rani lay upon a heap of frayed and tattered cushions in a small hot room that had no windows save a tiny square skylight, no furniture upon the threadbare mats but heavy pots and jars of brass, no ornament upon the white-washed walls but a coarse and evil daub in scarlet chalk depicting the Elephant God sporting with his wives, who shrank and writhed under the intimate caresses of that coiling, twining trunk.

The Princess Usha was now very changed from the radiant beauty of a decade ago. She lay upon her cushions, her enormous dark eyes staring out from a haggard face in which the cheek-bones jutted up sharply under the bilious yellow skin, and watched her son playing quietly on the floor with a few splinters of wood.

What a strange child he was: quiet and stealthy as a little animal; never singing or laughing at his play, but always working with secretive intensity, making patterns with little sticks, staring as though mesmerised at the crude coloured pictures in the children's reading-books that his mother had got from Bombay for him. He had his mother's eyes, deep-set and full of intelligence, and Usha noticed with feverish joy how increasingly he resembled her. She would catch him to her with hungry love, saying, "You are mine, entirely mine, dear lovely little peacock."

She could hardly bear it when Shahu, on his now rare visits to her, took the child in his arms and fondled him.

Perhaps she had never loved him even when, slim and handsome, he had wooed her in Bombay. But she had been fascinated by the picture of a princely lover, the imagined splendour of a court—incense of adolescent dreams and fume of dazzled vanity. But presently all her feelings for him had vanished under the cloud of a great horror, horror of the madness she knew was in his family, horror of that death-like coma that now so often overcame him, so that he would sit beside her for hours, staring at nothing with blank protruding eyes, his body

rigid save for a nervous twitching of his flaccid hands.

She tried not to think of the past, for when she did she would fall to hysterical weeping over the tragedy of it all, and to spasms of terror lest her reason also should falter in that tainted air.

But occasionally in the mornings between sleeping and waking—as her child nestled drowsy and warm against her breast—pictures of that old dead world flitted past her closed eyes, and careless of the renewed misery that her awakening to present reality would inevitably bring, she would let herself slip away upon the tide of memories, soothed by the easy current of happy years drifting past her in the dawn.

That tall yellow house on Malabar Hill. The drawing-room with its heavy furniture of black teak wood; its china cupboards and occasional tables crowded with knick-knacks, blue vases from Delhi and glass fruits from Gokak. Palms in brass pots stirring under the whirring fan. There Usha would sit evening after evening, an English novel on her knees, while her father, rimless pince-nez upon high, thin nose, rustled his *Times of India*, and her mother, sitting

placidly, would talk about her dresses—whether the red *sari* might not have its border changed and a new one of embroidery sewn on instead, and wonder why they had not yet received an invitation to the garden party at Government House.

Moths come fumbling in from the garden, and the sea is crying far below. The breeze that rises with the incoming tide rustles the papaiatrees and rasps the blood-red bougainvilleas against the shutters.

“Quite a nice breeze this evening,” her mother would say. “I’m always glad we have a house so high up. Lady Ibrahim’s house may be grander, and Lady Wacha is always talking about her garden—but no one gets a finer breeze than we do, and that is something to be thankful for in India.”

Her father looks up from his paper and says in his loud, public-meeting voice, “Yes, yes, my dear; you’re perfectly right, perfectly,” twirls his waxed moustache, readjusts his rimless pince-nez with one black ribbon, and with a busy rustle returns to his reading.

They always spoke in English, for Usha’s parents had all the affectionate admiration for everything English that distinguished well-bred Indians of an older generation. They had given

Usha as European an education as could be obtained in Bombay, sending her to the Convent School at Santa Cruz.

. . . Walking with the Mother Superior in the convent garden, white-walled, set with palms. She is telling me of Catholic Europe, honey-coloured churches of Italy, arrowy Gothic shrines dark-crouching under driving Northern skies.

Over there you can catch an inlet of the sea. Red sails of fishing-boats glint in the sun. A lean, ochre-coloured Arab dhow comes creeping over the calm water. Under the palms boatmen are working at their nets and they sing a melancholy sea-chanty. The long-drawn plaintive notes linger in the still air.

When Usha left school, she had her first season in Bombay. One of the few girls whose parents conceded a modicum of liberty, she was always certain of an invitation to every picnic and dance and dinner party. She was very popular among the rich young Parsis and Hindus, for she was not shy or self-conscious like many of the Indian girls who tried to ape European manners as a gesture of revolt, nor was she hard and selfishly avid of pleasure as were many of the Parsi women who returned

from Paris and London determined to surpass the standard of European freedom. She was like a child in her unaffected happiness and gratitude for any little attention; sensible and reserved in manner but with a bubbling joy of life.

And one day she met Prince Shahu at a dance-tea at the Taj Hotel.

Next day he had called at their house. Lady Gatke was torn between two emotions when she saw how obviously attracted he was by Usha. Like all anglicised Hindus she regarded the princes as a survival from the Dark Ages. But, at the same time, as a Maratha she was flattered and excited that she might have for a son-in-law the titular chief of the Maratha race. Her first instinct of suspicion melted under Shahu's easy English manners. He sat up very straight like a schoolboy, smiling politely and complimenting Lady Gatke on the furnishing of her house—"Nicer than anything I saw in England"—admiring her garden—"What! laid it all out yourself? Well, I think it's wonderful, simply marvellous."

As he rose to go he asked them all to be his guests at the Turf Club next day.

. . . Sitting round the tea-table in the enclosure under a large red umbrella, listening to the distant band. People stand up, and we stand up—

craning forward to see the Governor drive up in his carriage, escorted by his jingling, scarlet-turbaned guard. What an extraordinary scene, those crowds thronging against the white railings of the enclosure!—Arabs in their white burnous, Persians with those queer Pahlevi caps, Sikhs and Pathans. I am lying back in a basket chair, shading my face with my parasol and watching Prince Shahu's face, dark-gold and ruddy under the red umbrella.

Once their eyes had met and Shahu's face had for a moment lost its boyishness. It was shadowed as though with pain. And she knew, as certainly as if he had spoken, that he loved her, and remembering that moment she often reproached herself.

. . . I should never have encouraged him. I didn't love him. He wasn't really attractive, not the type I admired. Pretty in a way, but babyish. . . . But I was flattered by his admiration and thrilled at the thought that I might be a princess. Your Highness—how lovely that sounded! And I liked him in a way. He was simple, nice-mannered, easy to talk to.

After that visit to the Turf Club Usha had often gone out with Shahu for long drives along the coast. They would eat a picnic tea together in the long yellow grass under some red-berried

banyan-tree. Bulbuls whirled and twittered in the branches overhead, and the metallic-flashing bee-eaters spun like green fire-flies in the sunlight. Cow-bells tinkling down the sloping meadows—a soft sea-wind stirring the branches of a champak-tree, tumbling the gold-veined blossoms—behind a copse of mangoes a shepherd piping drowsily.

One evening as they returned in the haze of winter twilight, the car purring softly through the silence of rolling yellow downland, they had passed an old grey Hindu temple. On a sudden impulse Shahu had stopped the car. "Looks rather a fine old place," he said, "we might go in for a moment." And hand in hand they went down a flight of worn, moss-grown steps that led down into the sunken courtyard of the temple.

Usha remembered the scene as though it had happened yesterday. She had hardly ever before been into a Hindu temple, having accepted without question the Anglican agnosticism of her parents.

At one end of the courtyard rose the tall pylons of the shrine, the hard stone tortured into a maze of gods and heroes and heraldic beasts. The silver doors were open, and in the darkness



glimmered the white lingam, the phallic emblem of Shiva. The place was very quiet. High crenellated walls, along whose summit wept a line of amber-dropping laburnum, were a rampart from the tumult of the world. In the centre of the court was a marble-bordered pool, fed with hidden springs, and in the icy depth pale, sightless fish, sacred to the Lord of Names and Forms, moved slowly in languid circles. On a low platform before the shrine knelt a huge red bull carved conventionally from a block of sandstone. His thick and pouchy neck was hung with garlands of white tuberose, his snout and rump gaily daubed with crimson powder, and a brass bowl of roses lay between his kneeling forelegs.

Usha and Shahu sat down in silence by the pool and watched the fish threading in and out of their forest of waving weeds, arrowy tails electrically a-quiver, faint blue-ribbed fins rippling in the throb and play of spring-fed currents, whose tumult, far down in blue profundity, brought no wrinkle to the unbroken surface of the pool.

Presently a young priest came out of the cells ranged along the courtyard wall. His head was shaven, bare and polished, yellow and oval as the cranium of the child Akhnaton. He was

naked to the waist. A heavy silver belt with jingling fringe hung from hip to hip. Obliquely across his hairless breast he wore the Sacred Thread of the Twice-Born. His long eyes were a clouded green.

Kneeling a moment before the Bull, he laid his hand upon its rump; then passing into the inner shrine, he flung himself before the lingam in the *Shashtanga* posture of devotion, and cried aloud the holy syllable of salutation, "Om!" The sound rose and rang re-echoing in the hollow dome, moaned in the sultry darkness, died away in a whisper.

When he had finished praying he squatted on the steps of the temple. He must have seen Usha and Shahu, but he paid them no attention. Heavy eyelids closed over the opaque green eyes, leaving two blank scimitars between lid and lid, as he gazed back and down into his own soul, caught up by immediate volition into the deathlike trance of the initiate. The temple courtyard sank again to dreaming silence. A flight of green pigeons passed silently overhead, far up in the fading sky.

An enormous numinous awe had fallen upon Usha. Till now she had hardly thought of Hinduism save as a grotesque mythology. But at that moment she felt herself in the presence

of powers and spirits older than the world, the incarnate essence of dark-murmuring woods, of the red earth, the tiptoe streams and the furry velvet night. The Bull, whose harsh vermilion was like a discord in the watery evening light, troubled her obscurely. She felt a sudden shame as though at an obscene secret and her cheeks burned. And then a fierce pleasure leaped throbbing in her throat, a vehement primitive excitement, a tumult in her blood. In her soul stirred the racial memory of old ancestors who worshipped in just such a shrine; had danced the ritual dances under a sickle moon, and shrieked as the blood gushed; had adored in the crouching Bull the power and lordship of animal desire. Like a snake uncoiling from his winter sleep the magic and ecstasy of the old faith stirred in her trembling loins.

You must see through Usha's eyes the pageantry of her marriage to Shahu and her installation as Rani. Processions of barefoot princesses in glorious Benares silks, bearing aloft gold trays laden with symbolic jewellery. White aigrettes nodding over silken turbans and the rasping whisper of plumed fans.

And Shahu came to her crowned with yellow flowers, his face framed with ropes of champak-

blossoms, a thin gold shawl folded over his oiled and scented breast, purple silks looped across his loins. The priests held a curtain between bride and bridegroom while the Sanscrit invocation moaned and sobbed about them, and conches bugled and drums throbbed and rang. When the curtain was torn away the crowd shouted and threw handfuls of coloured rice; and hand in hand Shahu and Usha trod the ritual measure of the Seven Steps.

At the evening banquet rows of nobles squatted in the great courtyard of the palace, whose floor had been painted by the hands of princesses with symbolic designs in green and vermilion. At the head of the double line of diners Shahu and Usha sat feeding each other according to custom with honey-cakes; and each time they exchanged these treachly morsels they paid each other stilted compliments in rhyming couplets of their own inspiration. Usha could see the endless lines of silent squatting figures, left shoulder bare, coils of coloured silk looped over the right shoulder, long yellow shaven heads, bowed heads with scented and curled locks, all leaning forward and listening—[. . . and however am I going to get a rhyme for that word, I wonder? ]—while overhead the pigeons squawked and rustled in the grass-grown eaves

and eagles circled slowly, slowly, now dark against the amethystine glaze, now golden where the sunlight caught the sheen of their great wings.

She had never been wearied of all those ceremonies. The colour and clangour of trumpets had stirred in her the instincts of a gorgeous and barbaric past. A new enchanted world, opening before her swimming eyes, made the stuffy Anglicism of Bombay seem in retrospect like a cul-de-sac of shoddy provincial villas. For a moment as she waited for her elephant she thought of the little teas and sewing-parties of her mother's friends.

. . . How can I have been content? she asked herself. The elephant reared up towards the sky, his silver howdah dazzling in the sun. Red-turbaned squadrons jingled past on white horses. The feudatory chieftains of Krishnagad clustered about their sovereigns in gorgeous rivalry of flowing muslin and clashing sabres and diamond-sparkling caps. Red umbrellas and white horse-tail plumes and ostrich-feather fans swung slowly over jewel-framed hieratic faces. And oh, the trumpets and the drums, and the frantic uproar of the mob grasping with outstretched hands at the twinkling rain of largesse.

It was the peak and summit of her life. The future seemed serene and golden. And only a few months later had occurred that incident that was the first warning.

Shahu had been driving her through the narrow bazaar when there had been a sudden cry and confusion in the crowds before them. A dozen horsemen rode slowly down the street facing the car, the people parting at their approach, and behind them came a carriage drawn by black horses.

"Who is it?" she asked.

Shahu's face had blanched as though with anger. He frowned and bit his lips. He was trembling. He sounded his horn furiously. But the carriage came on towards them. The street was narrow and either his motor or the carriage would have to draw into the gutter.

. . . But why doesn't Shahu drive on, call out to the carriage driver, who must be some foreigner unaware of who we are?

"Shahu, Shahu, what is it?" For Shahu gave a little gasp of despair, swung the steering-wheel round. The car lurched round, its mud-guard scraping against the pavement.

"Shahu! Why are you crying?"

There was something strange and menacing in the air.

The carriage came on slowly, passed them and clattered away behind, down the cobbles of the narrow winding street. Shahu had not looked up. He was staring fixedly at his steering-wheel.

In the carriage Usha saw a woman, huddled against golden cushions, swathed in green. Between the folds of silk a lean gaunt face stared haughtily ahead. Two beady eyes glittered on either side a huge hooked nose. The sunken cheeks were pitted with smallpox. She sat motionless, her hands splayed out upon her knees; aloof, inhuman, like an idol borne in procession upon the shoulders of the faithful.

They drove back to the palace in silence. Shahu seemed as though weighed down with misery and shame. Stealing an occasional glance at him, Usha was troubled by the tears in his eyes and the pathetic droop of his mouth.

It was some days later at a dinner given at the British Residency that she began to understand. She had been resting alone behind some palms on the verandah when she heard English voices in the garden below. It was a still night and she could hear every word they said.

“ . . . Wonder what difference that little lady will make? His Highness seems very devoted to her.”

“Yes, the stage is getting rather crowded for the old woman.”

“Jove, what a marvellous old thing she is! Ugly as sin and wicked as a Borgia. But clever as they make ’em. As long as she’s alive——”

“No, His Highness hasn’t really finished her. He sits in the Durbar and gets the homage, but I have a feeling she’ll be the real thing one day. Even old Nana Saheb will never be safe till she’s out of the way. As for His Highness, he’s terrified of her. Someone told me in confidence that when he was a kid Indira had . . .” She could not catch the rest. The voices faded away down the garden.

From that day the shadow had increased till it blotted out the sun for her. If only Shahu had been well and strong these whispers about Princess Indira would not have touched her. He would, sooner or later, have ordered her to leave the State, however tolerant and gentle his nature. But her realisation of what Indira’s presence in Krishnagad would mean to her had coincided with the first symptoms of Shahu’s affliction.

There was only Nana Saheb left. She liked and trusted him, and was always glad at the rare occasions of their meeting. If only, she



often sighed, if only we could speak to each other in perfect confidence upon that subject which is nearest the heart of both of us. For she knew the old man's devotion to the House of Krishnagad. And for herself, though she now shrank physically from Shahu, she had a great pity for him. He had been slender and dainty to look upon, and even now, behind the flaccid expressionless face, she sometimes caught a look, a memory of that boyish eagerness and vitality that had formerly given him an appealing grace.

And there was her child—ah God, how her whole body ached for love of him!—hers, all hers, the one thing left to her in life. Without him she would have long ago succumbed to despair and the sweet release of opium—for what resources had life for one in her perilous loneliness?

Sometimes in her ever-present, ever-growing fear of poison, fear of the contagion of madness, she almost weakened, and wondered if she were not foolish.

. . . Let me give up this useless struggle and escape to Bombay.

It was true that her father was now dead (he had died probably from shock after the loss of most of his savings in the 1921 crash) and that her mother lived in a small flat in Bombay Fort.

But there at least she would be safe, she and her child. But her mother would hardly welcome her. Anglicised though she might be, she retained the Hindu view of marriage. . . . And what would be the future of her son? She would have no money of her own. Perhaps her mother could scrape together enough money to give him a second-rate schooling, and he might get a petty job as a clerk in some business or Government office. Perhaps not as good a post. Thousands of college boys nowadays couldn't get anything to do at all.

. . . For be sure that they will find other heirs for Shahu. They will find an error in my marriage rites and my son will never rule in Krishnagad. To have endured so much and then to admit defeat, to resign myself to despair. No, no. . . .

Oh, what sins did I commit in a former life that I am condemned to this frightful Karma? I cannot escape. For even if I did flee to Bombay, sacrificing my son's inheritance, I could not avoid my destiny. It would come upon me in the next life—or dozens of lives hence—come upon me inevitably like a dream-monster pursuing one stealthily in the endless corridors of a nightmare. Only by working out my fate and exhausting my meed of suffering can I obtain

deliverance and rest. But, oh God, sweet Lord Krishna, let not my sins be visited upon my child. . . .

And feverishly she would retell to herself, often chattering aloud like a mad woman, the old stories of Krishna's infinite loving-kindness and mercy—how, when Chokamela, the out-cast, was driven from the temple gates by the proud Brahmans, the stone idol of the god stirred into life and raised the poor beggar up on to the altar beside himself; how the sins of Kanhopatra, the dancer, were forgiven her, for all that she was an accursed Mussulman, because she came humbly to pray at the god's shrine. . . . "Surely I am as worthy of pity as any of those?" she would cry, beating her temples feverishly with clenched fists.

But this morning of the Dassera Festival she felt calm and weary. She lay upon her couch, staring about her with deep-sunken eyes.

Outside the palace she could hear the preparations for the Durbar. Snorting and stamping of horses; the muffled tramp of elephants; clatter of rifle-butts on cobble stones; steady patter of kettle-drums fumbling about a single note, straying away in feverish counterpoint, but returning with a scurry to a slow pulsing unison; the high

note of a flute in the palace chapel where even now they must be worshipping the sacred sword; stealthy, slanting moan of gongs; the wail of the hermaphrodites dancing before their goddess, fanning with peacock feathers the silver mask of her face with its broad nostrils and the huge blank pits of her eyes.

Presently she heard a shuffling footstep in the passage, the door creaked on its rusty hinges, and Shahu stood on the doorstep, blinking, smiling.

He had not been to see her for some days. She rose to her feet and went towards him. He patted her gently on the shoulder and shuffled towards the couch. The child opened wide eyes and, rolling over on its back, stretched out two tiny fists. Shahu's smile broadened to an infantile grin. He sat down by the child, took its hands in one of his, and stroked its down-furred head.

Usha sat down on the couch. They sat in silence with the child between them. A grey scorpion ran out from under the couch and flicked across the dusty floor to a hole in the rotting woodwork of the wall. A lizard on the ceiling stealthily approached a fly; one moment the fly was there, preening its gold-flecked wings, the next it had disappeared and the lizard's scaly eyelids drooped over onyx eyes.

"You have been to the chapel?"

Shahu nodded slowly.

"When is the Durbar?"

"At midday."

"And there's a garden party at the British Residency in the evening?"

Again he nodded

... Oh, why doesn't he speak properly, show some sign of life?

"I shall wear that new gold sari I got from Benares last month. It's rather heavy on the shoulders, that gold fringe along the border is so thick, you know. But it is a lovely piece of stuff and the English ladies like seeing a nice sari. They always tell me I must show them how to put on a sari. It seems so easy to us, but they can never understand the way we loop it between the legs and tuck the fringe in at the waist."

He nodded, even more slowly this time.

... This is one of his bad days evidently. I suppose he feels depressed at the thought of the long Durbar and the garden party.

"I shall take Chandu with me to the garden party." She picked the child up and, setting him on her knee, smoothed his tousled hair with her fingers. "I have bought a lovely jewelled cap for him—red velvet with a pattern of diamonds

in front. And he must wear his tight white Jodhpur breeches like a Rajput prince, with green tip-tilted slippers. The English ladies always love to see him, especially in his grand clothes. They say he looks so sweet and serious and old-fashioned. Don't they, Chandu, my pet? He sits on my knee, Shahu, and they like shaking hands with him. He sits up so straight, and serious, and royal, giving each of them his pudgy little hand. Oh, he'll be a real Aryan king, won't you, Chandu, my little flower?" And she buried the tip of her nose in the child's dimpling cheek.

Shahu lifted his blank eyes and stared at the child without speaking. Presently he stretched out his arms and took the child.

"Ah, Shahu, don't. He was so happy with me." For the child had been chuckling and crowing in her lap, and now as Shahu laid him on his back on the couch the happiness faded out of his face and he went stiff and rigid.

Shahu began to stroke the child's head and face with large boneless hands.

His heavy movements affected Usha's nerves. Those lethargic caresses seemed to transmit to the child some of his own dull apathy. It lay there staring sullenly at the ceiling.

. . . God, does he never guess? I would have

admired him more if he had guessed the secret of the child, if he had raged and stormed and struck me. I would have admired him as a man—as a proudly jealous husband. Can his brain have rotted so deep that he doesn't remember the child could never have been his?—that he had never had the power of being a father?

Not that she blamed herself. The laws of Manu lay down in hard, clear words that if the husband be not truly a man, the wife may obtain a child by resorting at night to the Temple of Shiva. Everyone knew that the god of fertility acted through the medium of a priest—but what matter? It is the right of every wife to have a child—and how much more so the right of a queen to have a son who shall be a prince in Aryavarta. And Shiva had been very kindly to Usha, had not sent her some mangy, lecherous old priest but a young and lovely youth.

She had escaped from the palace one evening cloaked in an old brown sari. She ran down to the Shiva Temple near the river. It was a heavy, sweltering evening. Along the river smouldered the pyres whereon corpses had been burnt during the day (for there was plague in the city) and the bitter smart of glowing ashes was

in the air. The water flowed sluggishly, washing against mounds of pebbles a few singed shreds of cloth that had been cast into the river with the charred bones of the dead. A crocodile slumbered on the bank, huge and distorted in the shadows like a gorged elemental. Vultures dozed in the trees, fluffing out their feathers around their skinny frames.

Usha kept her mouth tight shut, for such a place was haunted by the spirits of the dead, and if you yawned or even opened your mouth they might leap down your throat and then you would be possessed. In Bombay such stories would have seemed ridiculous—but here everyone believed them, they were in the very air.

She hurried over the rocks along the riverbank, the fold of her sari drawn tight over her mouth, till she came to the wide stone staircase, flanked with high carved pylons, that led up to the temple, whose lotus-tipped cone rose from a cluster of whispering pipal-trees, a spear-blade resting against the sky. Some reed-lights trembled in the crannies of pylons, and at a shrine to the Monkey God, half-way up the stairway, a suppliant had left two candles burning beside a brass tray filled with rose petals.

At the head of the stairway a narrow low door



led into the temple. Usha bowed her head, and ran breathlessly into the dark courtyard.

The place was full of an enormous gloom. Warm breaths of wind, blowing in sudden gusts, stirred the dry leaves along the paved floor. Overhead the pipal-trees rustled and whispered endlessly, their long grey branches bending in the ply of the night wind, the brittle metallic leaves a-quiver with harsh sibilance. Within the shrine a single reed-light quivered, and the lingam was a milky finger in the darkness.

The vast bulk of the symbolic Bull crouched in sullen somnolence at the entrance to the holy of holies. Its brutal shoulders were hunched in brooding resignation, its square snout disdainfully affronted the stars.

Usha flung herself down, pressed her hot forehead and rubbed her cheeks against the cold stone of the Bull's flanks, and fondled the contour of his rump, according to the prescribed ritual of intercession. Then she went to the lingam shrine and, reaching up on tip-toe, swung the clapper of the great bell. A deep bronze note answered her, the bell swung moaning and thundering overhead, the whole domed shrine rang with echoes.

When the tremendous clamour died away, was it fancy—or the echo of an echo—or did

something stir within the shrine? Was it a snake uncoiling in the darkness or a patter of frightened mice?

Usha listened, trembling.

Trees sighed and murmured, dead leaves in the courtyard eddied to and fro in rustling spirals.

Was all else quiet?

Or was there a faint, faint voice from the shrine—from the darkness that was heavy with the scent of crushed rose petals—from the shrine in whose murky depths the holy lingam glimmered like a beacon of salvation—a voice higher than the far, thin note of a flute or the plangent twang of a guitar, a shrill note like the distant cry of a bat—a voice that she heard with no mortal ear but which seemed to be a pining chime of elfin bells within her very brain.

She felt immediately at peace.

She had heard nothing, seen nothing—nothing that she could be sure was not a dream or trick of disordered nerves. But she felt, she knew with the conviction of the devout, that the unquiet alembic of her mind was suddenly full of the gold of happy certainty, that her feverish brow had been cooled by a mysterious benediction.

She rose and walked out into the night with buoyant, almost defiant footsteps.

The pale luminance of twilight had faded from the world, but from behind a line of trees crowning rounded hills, a smoky ochre glow stained the sky. Usha heard a distant wail of pipes, tingling and jangling of small bells and the bounce of heavy gourd-drums. The throbbing rhythm of the music tapped quietly at her heart.

. . . Why, it must be a fair! and suddenly she felt excited and reckless and eager for adventure. She hadn't been to a fair since—oh, since she was a child.

Red hobby-horses and smoky booths and showmen and jugglers and snake-charmers and conjurors and dancing-boys with ankle-bells and gilded finger nails. . . .

She clapped her hands, drew back her sari over her shoulders and ran forward, stumbling over jagged stones and tufts of spear-grass, tearing her bare legs against sharp thorn-bushes, bruising her toes against the winding roots of banyan-trees. Presently the ground sloped downwards to a wide road, and she was grateful for the deep warm dust that was soft and comfortable to her feet. It was a village fair, in honour of some local god.

Banias from the city had set up rickety booths all round the village, deciduous huts—mats

swung across tilting bamboos. They sold cheap tinsel trinkets, bells and paper flowers, ladies' shoes with huge pompoms, riding-crops with silver tassels, wooden dolls for children, clay models of staring gods and seductive little goddesses—Saraswati attended by peacocks, and Ganesh the elephant-headed glancing coyly at his bulging paunch. Bullocks, whose horns were covered with silver paper and knotted with coloured streamers, stumped patiently through the churning dust, dragging creaky wooden carts wherein a whole family (father with fine red turban and new-painted shoes held carefully in the hand to avoid the soilure of the road, children with clean shirts and tinselled caps and heavy bracelets and wide kohl-lined eyes staring entranced about them) jolted together over the uneven ground. A camel, from whose high and scornful head hung braided tassels and jangling silver bells, lunged through the press, bearing a rich Moslem merchant—he squats above a pile of priceless carpets, the clanking, intricate framework of his hookah (chased silver tray for charcoal, ebony mouthpiece hung with silver chains, clay bowl for rose-water) clasped in an unwieldy parcel under one arm. In the shops of the singing-bird sellers bulbuls chirp and whistle, or suddenly cry their rippling, bell-like

note. Children stop and stare, raising covetous hands, and the harassed father answers, "Ah, no, dear little *bachcha*, how can your poor father afford a singing-bird in a painted cage? If you were only a little smarter you would bring down a green parrot with a stone and we could weave a cage for him and teach him to talk. *Mithu! Mithu!* they say. Just like that." Flags and streamers flutter in the warm, eddying wind; the mats and rush-curtains of the booths sway and tremble. Behind drawn shutters dance-music is playing—ankle-bells jangle and clash; braceleted hands clap, clap and clap; ankleted feet stamp dully, beating a steady rhythm; harsh, raucous voices roar and laugh, a boy laughs shrilly and unevenly, a woman lifts her voice in a horrible screaming laugh, a silk dress rasps and tears and screams apart, a torrent of abuses—tables with tumbling crockery fall, shattering, crashing. Harsh, white glaring light of acetylene lamps, and heaving, stirring shadows. Faces chalk-white in the blinding light, teeth flashing and eyes agleam. Faces dark and hooded under heavy turbans, mouths darkly agape and eyes unfathomable pits. Odour of rank sweat and sprinkled rose-water, odour of carnation and mango-blossom, odour of damp hot linen and muffled femininity and dust-

pasted masculine loins, odour of rotting garlands and ashes and steaming dung, cow dung and camel dung.

Usha pushed her way through the crowd, breathless with excitement—happy, ah, happy as a child. How sweet a release it was from the airless silence of the palace, the whispering and tip-toe scurrying, the tapping and fumbling along enclosing walls! She laughed at the paunchy showmen, the customers raising hands to heaven in the ecstasy of bargaining, children clapping and dancing in the dust. She peered in at a theatre—four walls of dried grass, a roof of cowhides and a stage of planks supported on petrol tins. A king, in the legendary robes of Aryan royalty (peacock plumes, gold kilt and cloak), was arguing with a clown—recognisable as such by his European clothes and white sun-helmet. The king was trying to instruct him in the etiquette of Indian compliment. . . . “For instance, when you wish to please a cultured courtesan you say she has a waist as shapely as that of a lioness, and a slow, swinging walk like an elephant’s.” But the clown kept getting it all wrong. . . .” A waist like an elephant’s,” he would begin, and the audience would shout with laughter.

In the next tent was a cinema. The film de-

picted the famous epic of the death of Afzul Khan. Amid the jiggling snowflakes and the rain of soot you could distinguish the interior of a mosque. Afzul Khan has come to pray and to beg the blessing of the chief priest. But the priest shrinks back in horror. "Why, you have no head upon your shoulders! Blood oozes from the jagged stump of your neck. . . ." So Afzul Khan knew that he was to die, and returning home, like a good Mussulman, he strangled all his women so that they should not be dishonoured by the infidel. Now the scene changed and you saw Shivaji, the Hindu hero, lurking in the bowels of the mountains, in his hand the carved tiger-claws with which, when he embraces Afzul Khan in simulated friendship, he will pierce the backbone of the disgusting cow-eater.

Usha shuddered and hurried on. She came out of the main street of the village into a lane where rose a temple to Hanuman, the Monkey God, patron of athletes. In his honour men were wrestling in a small clearing before the shrine. The light of smoky lamps glimmered on oiled backs and concave, straining stomachs and muscle-knotted limbs. One wrestler was an easy victor. He seemed a popular favourite, for the crowd shouted, "Well done, Sadashiv; again! again! Aha, Sadashiv!"

He was a strong and sturdy young Maratha, godlike in rhythmic grace of movement, swift as a panther, with a broad golden chest and smooth sleek stomach. He had a faunlike charm—small pointed ears, slant eyes and marvellous white teeth gleaming between thick upward-tilting lips. He was proud of his youth and strength—proud as a young bull. When he had thrown all his rivals he strutted about the ring, caressing his firm shining chest with broad hands. He eyed the women in the audience with a frank and sensual stare. When he came near where Usha was standing he broke into a grin.

Suddenly recalled to a sense of her danger, Usha veiled her face with her sari and hurried away into the darkness. She paused at length under a wide banyan-tree, and sank down upon the ground, leaning her shoulder against the hard tree-trunk. How fast her heart was beating! Ah, that lovely creature, that young wrestler! She saw again his splendid jutting chest, his rounded tapering thighs and strong brown arms. She had long ago resigned herself to Shahu's apathy and to the prospect of perpetual childlessness. But that sudden vision of male beauty had troubled her, had awoken old passionate emotions that she had hoped to have outgrown, had hoped for her soul's peace were



all long dead. Her pulse ran on, a drum beating a maniac tattoo. Her breath came in painful gasps. She closed her eyes and lifted her hands to her forehead. Oh, that makes one's fate harder to bear than one thought. To miss all that—never to know the rapture of real satisfaction—to know that other women, even the poorest, had in their lives a recompense denied to her. Who was that wrestler's mate?—some callow peasant-girl, some toil-coarsened virago, some lined and fever-wasted wretch. But yet she would know a joy that Usha with all the beauty of her delicate soft body could never share.

. . . Ah, Shiva, Shiva—for a moment in that temple I found comfort and relief, but now . . . ! Do the Gods, I wonder, mock their worshippers with momentary drugs of balm?—do they never, never send us real happiness in answer to our prayers? . . .

And she burst into a flood of bitter tears, rocking herself to and fro, throwing herself prone upon the ground, her hair spread about her shoulders, her hands clutching at the warm soil, her whole body shaken with sobs as she lay there like a very symbol of misery and despair.

. . . Oh, God, God, why was I ever born? It

is better that I should die, for I have nothing left in the world to live for. . . .

She had fallen into that utter abandon of sorrow which only Orientals know—that abysmal, hopeless grief in the experience of which an Indian's heart will often fail under the stress of a mad, unreasoning will to self-annihilation. . . .

But even as she felt her body growing weak with exhaustion, a voice said, "Why did you run from me? I have been looking for you everywhere."

She raised her drawn and tear-stained face and saw the handsome wrestler bending above her. She held her breath for a moment, incredulous, then rapturous.

Trembling she pulled her sari about her shoulders, pushed her hair back from her forehead and rubbed her dirty hands upon the back of her dress.

But the wrestler knelt beside her and took her hand in both of his.

"Dear, lovely rose petal, were you afraid of me?"

"No, not afraid of you," she replied, "afraid of myself."

He smiled tenderly, his long narrow eyes twinkling—and, oh, the flash of his sharp white teeth!

He took her in his arms and she leaned over to him unresisting. She bent round and down under his overreaching embrace, she was lost and crushed under his heavy chest, his enormous gripping thighs. The world went black and blank around her.

When he was eased of his desire they lay a long while in each other's arms, silent, unstirring, rapt in a swoon of quiet happiness.

The night passed on, the noises of the fair were a distant lulling murmur, but in that cell of darkness under the banyan-tree they lay unconscious of time and the world, she only knowing that his arm was round her, binding her to him. . . .

Suddenly she heard the noise of cow-bells and, opening her eyes, saw the horizon afume with whey-soft light.

She kissed him feverishly—he all sleepy and warm, rubbing drowsy eyes and lazily stretching limbs relaxed by satiety. She drew her sari over her head, half-hiding her face, and hurried away.

When she turned back for a last farewell he was standing silhouetted against the ashen sky, dark head thrown back, arms akimbo and strong legs wide apart—an Aryan hero in the morning of the world.

In succeeding weeks she often wondered if it had been a dream, vivid and delightful, a merciful gift of the Mother of Illusion to sustain her in her wretchedness. But presently her child came and she knew that the memory of that young colossus proudly astride the hill, outlined against the dawn, was indeed no trick of fancy. . . .

Leaning against the wall in her airless room, she had for the moment forgotten everything save that entrancing picture, and sat rigid with closed eyes and parted lips. Then she shook herself free from the trammels of remembered happiness, sat up and took Chandu again on her knee.

Shahu, who had found a moment's distraction in playing with the child, now relapsed into complete apathy; his arms fell lifelessly to his side, his eyes stared blankly straight ahead. Soon he would take his dose of fiery, vivifying opium. A weary day of ceremonies ahead. At the Resident's garden party he would be expected to talk and laugh—well, another dose of opium for that. One dose before the Durbar and another before the garden party and then a long merciful sleep.

Something stirred in his mind. His eyes flickered. Slowly he turned his head towards Usha.

"That musician of mine," he said, "worried me this morning. Worried me. Why can't they leave me alone? It's made me feel unwell, physically unwell. I feel a heaviness in my stomach. Talking about a plot like that."

Usha sprang up with a start.

"Plot!" she cried. "What plot? who is plotting?"

Her body was curved, her head thrust forward like a cobra poised to strike.

"I don't know. I forget."

"Yes, you do know. You must know. He must have told you. Didn't you ask him? Surely you asked him?"

"He said . . . he said . . . Nana Saheb used to say it too. Why can't they leave me alone?"

"But who? who?" Her voice rose to a scream.

Looking at her almost guiltily, he whispered, "Princess Indira."

"I knew it. Always that woman. Always, always. Ever since the day when we met her in her carriage in the street. Why don't you put her out of the way? Don't you realise as long as she is here, in Krishnagad, our lives are in danger, yours and mine and the child's?"

He shuddered and said "Oh," in a plaintive

little voice, lifting his hands as though to ward off her vehemence.

"Besides," he added, "what would I do? I can't have her murdered. It would be wrong. In England . . . After all, she is a woman. And, you see, the news might get out. Then, there'd be a Government enquiry. Officials sent down from Simla. I might be deposed."

She made a gesture of impatience.

"You could have her confined in a fortress on the Carnatic frontier, guarded by trusted soldiers. You might have her certified insane and shut up in a lunatic asylum in British India. . . . Oh, there are thousands of things you could have done—could do now, Shahu."

"But what could she do to us?"

"Do? What could *she* do? Have you never seen anyone die by poison?"

He shivered and covered his face with his hands. Yes, he had seen his mother die.

He was still a child then. He was in his mother's room. A servant brought their evening meal. It was a yellow evening, close and hot. He had felt sickly and had no appetite. "Come, Shahu," his mother said. "Look, I will pick out some nice pieces for you. Surely you'll take them. What! not even from your mother's fingers?" She pleaded with him, but he shook

his head, sullen, unhappy. And she had eaten alone. Then suddenly she screamed, clapped hand to side, rolled over on her back, writhing, kicking, her heels drumming on the floor. Servants ran in. Seeing her in her rending agony, they guessed. . . . They stood in a silent, trembling herd, crumpled against the door. Shahu ran to the window shrieking for help. The courtyard below was empty. He raised his eyes, and at a window opposite he saw the long grey face of Princess Indira.

The affair was hushed up, of course. The Rani had died of influenza. Shahu was sent to school, in Bombay.

He nodded, his eyes distended with horror at that memory.

"You see?" She was quick to follow up her advantage. "What has happened once may happen again. Oh, Shahu, Shahu, my husband, why can't you understand? As long as she lives we are in peril. Don't think about me—but ah, in the name of God, think of this poor child. Look at him, Shahu, helpless, tiny, his life in our hands. Don't you want him to succeed you on the throne of Krishnagad? Could you bear to see him dying before your eyes? Writhing as your mother writhed. Screaming as she screamed."

He sat silent, his chin upon his chest.

Then he sighed and rose heavily to his feet.

"I must go to prepare for the Durbar," he said in a sad, lifeless voice.





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NOON

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PART II

NOON

SQUARE squat houses, with honey-coloured walls and carpet-hung balconies, shimmered in the hard white glare, shimmered against the sun-bleached cliff of heaven—shimmered like a city under the sea, glimpsed far down through miles of clear white water. Palms hung heavy leaves unstirring, mango-trees were pyramids of metallic peacock-green. The ramparts (that were faint powder-blue in the morning mist and butter-coloured in the dreaming amber evening) now rose above the city of waves of piercing white. In the quarters of the poor, corrugated iron roofs reflected the sunlight like a lake of molten metal, so that one's eyes ached at sight of their dancing, dazzling heat. The city seemed to swoon in the white-hot haze. But under a roofing of dry branches and cow-hides the river of the bazaar flowed in its deep winding tunnel—the struggling currents of humanity its ceaseless ebb and flow.

Some *bantias* went clop-clopping past on donkeys, feet stuck out at an angle, red shoes bobbing, money-bags ajingle, and in a corner

of the street negroes with scarlet loin-cloths sweated and strained under heavy loads. A clerk of the Durbar, in English coat and trousers and purple gold-fringed Brahman cap, was bargaining endlessly with an old country-woman over a handful of chillies—she, in her bell-skirted sari, sewn with little mirrors, shook her head and, in clipped rustic speech, taunted him with avarice—he, adjusting rimless pince-nez, stared at her in shocked astonishment, and then waved his umbrella and stamped his feet in a passion of exasperation. Young Mussulman bloods sauntered down the middle of the street, red caps at a rakish angle, a rose over one ear and a tuft of curled and scented hair fluffed out over the other: women from Jodhpur with bare stomachs and gold veils over their faces—Muslim women peering through tiny eye-holes in their shapeless ghostly *burkas*—Brahman women wearing their lovely *chitons* with Hellenic grace, bare-headed and chapleted with champak-blossom—courtesans, with European silk pyjamas, high-heeled shoes and gilded finger-nails—Rajputs in enormous turbans, their long beards flowing in divided channels over tremendous chests—lean, wiry Marathas—subtle Gujarati bankers, clutching shapeless parchment bundles covered with a crabbed calli-

graphy—blue-eyed Pathans in Turkish trousers and gold waistcoats, their long yellow hair plastered with butter and set in feminine curls around their pale and bony faces—emaciated mendicants, stark naked, smeared with ashes, their wild eyes peering through a mask of dust and clay, their hair elf-locked and matted with filth, shouting the names of the Creator and demanding alms with menace from the passers-by.

A sacred cow munched a garland woven for a dancing-girl while the flower-seller stood gossiping with the cigarette-seller opposite. Above the doors of the restaurants flaunted banners with mellifluous names—Ritz-Carlton, Waldorf or Taj-Mahal Palace. Beside the door flared an open fire, streaked with close-set skewers that hissed and dripped butter and oil and ghee over the blue-veined flames, as the rows of spicy kidney-balls and *pakor*as and *sambosa* pies crackled and turned brown. The bald, fat proprietor bending above the fire, turning the sizzling meats, wiped beads of sweat from the yellow paunches of his neck. His servants (from the smoky interior with its sanded floor and creaking benches and puddly iron tables upon which impatient clients beat with their shoes) shouted out, "Oh, master! five more *pakor*as and a dish of *kichadi* rice." "*Kichadi* rice?" and

the proprietor plunged fistfuls of rice into a steaming cauldron, called out for spinach and hard-boiled eggs and buttered chicken and strips of salted fish to add to the savoury mess.

A boy on a bicycle swung round the corner with a prodigious bell-ringing and ran full-tilt into two old *baniyas*, nodding and shaking with senile merriment. "*Hût*, you son of a pariah bitch! Did your crippled mother mate with a blind man that you are so foolish?"—"That will do, you impotent old fool . . ." and a policeman (a bare-legged, sandalled Maratha, with yellow pill-box cap tilted over one ear) battered his iron-shod staff upon the cobbles in a vain effort to appease the disputants.

In the temples conches bugled for the mid-day prayer. Bare-chested priests with purple skirts carried brass trays of flowers to the altars of the gods. The images were washed with honey and milk, robed in stiff cloth-of-gold, and soothed by lamps swung continually before their eyes. The silk-robed Twice-born passed into Shiva's Temple, ringing the bell above the outer doorway to awaken the god. Shining in the light of seven tall candlesticks rose the sacred lingam, sleek with perfumed oil. In a high niche in the wall behind was a shadowy image of

Parvati, Queen of Heaven, garlanded with marigolds. Over the lingam swung a perforated silver boat, from which holy water dripped, dripped upon the blunt white stone. The priest, turning his back to the altar, held waist-high a tray of bilva leaves and a vessel of holy water. Worshippers stood before him, heads bowed and hands outstretched. In each hand the priest laid a single bilva leaf. With a murmured blessing he dipped his forefinger in the holy water and touched the two eyes and breasts of each worshipper. They bowed, closing their eyes and crossing themselves, and each laid his bilva leaf upon the lingam and scattered saffron powder thereover.

Beyond the outer gate of the temple the outcastes clustered in piteous, huddled groups, exposing frightful ailments, bent with toil and racked with fever, ignorant of the ritual prayers and the intricate etiquette of approach to the Durbar of divinity, but mumbling their poor, simple petitions with shrunk mouths agape and outstretched pleading hands. . . .

Through cracks in the high roof of dried foliage you could see overhead the towering battlements of the city, the endless line of temples—grey pylons and tortured spirals of carved gods,



writhing, posturing and grimacing, innumerable shadowy forms like companies of clustering bats, and tall, thin pinnacles crowned with sad, ochre-coloured flags—and in their very midst, rising like the spears of the Semitic horde, the green flags and the red flags and the black flags of Islam, grouped about the turrets of their faith, the foam-cold bubbles of Moslem domes.



Princess Indira had called the house, to which perforce she had retired on Shahu's accession, Jalmandir—that is to say, the Palace of Waters. It was a low, square, yellow building with a steep red-tiled roof and green-framed windows. Before the palace stretched a long rectangular lake having in its centre a large pagoda. The lake was bordered with palms and mango-trees.

On the green balcony of her palace, overlooking the still crystal water, Princess Indira spent much of her day, gazing with blinking eyes at the sky, at the swarthy mango-trees and the graceful curves of the pagoda. Often she had her favourite youth Sadashiv with her. She was much attached to, indeed passionately amorous of that graceful creature. He had been with her

a long while now and she had never tired of him. Rather her devotion had deepened to an almost insane obsession. She felt ill and feverish when he was away. She moped with senile selfishness if he seemed less ardent than usual. She scolded him as though he were a child, slapping his face with her wrinkled hands, and then she would fall on his neck imploring forgiveness, promising him delectable gifts, loading him with jewels that made his peasant's eyes glitter with avaricious gratitude.

He lay now on the rug at her feet, a young animal in repose.

And hardly aware of him she chattered to herself—messengers, loyal troops, priests who hated a queen reared in heresy and unbelief, who wearied of the domination of the Minister. . . . And to-night, to-night. . . . “Then, my adorable one, my royal crocodile, I shall sit in their seat and you shall sit beside me.”

The boy sighed. He wished she wouldn't go on about this plot. It worried him. Why couldn't they lie there in the sun and drink and eat sweet mangoes and sleep? . . .

Why did she bother?—endlessly spinning plans. I'll make you a prince. Bah, he was happy as he was. Happy to lie in the sun like a cat and yawn and stretch luxuriously. Some-

times she almost drove him mad, almost made him wish he'd never been alone in the square that evening when the closed and curtained car had drawn in to the curb close by him and the jewelled hand had beckoned. . . .

But no. He loved his silk tunics and bracelets and necklaces. He moved his fingers and diamonds flashed. Silks and precious stones and perfumed oils—what more could heart desire? Especially the heart of a peasant.

How astonished his poor old father would be to see him now! A hard, narrow, austere man. A petty farmer toiling endlessly for a scanty livelihood in the barren hills. He had had to be up before the sun in those days. His father would shake him roughly, drag him to his feet. They would tramp down the village street in the misty dawn—he still rubbing drowsy eyes—and climb the stony boulder-strewn incline that led up to their fields. . . . And when they returned in the evening it would be already twilight, the air full of the sharp tang of wood-smoke and the odour of champak. His eyes smarted with the acrid dust and the stinging smoke of burning cow-dung. His feet and calf muscles ached as he stumbled over the hard ridges of ploughed clay. Back in their narrow hut, a dry biscuit and a bowl of milk—and his father would curl up in

a camel's-hair rug gruffly muttering, "Better start sleeping soon, Sadashiv. No excuses in the morning."

Often Sadashiv had longed to join the other village boys who sang and clapped in time round a big fire, or to listen to the police constable (the village's sole proud literate) read aloud a page from the Scriptures. But he felt so weary, every muscle a throbbing torture—and if he stayed out late the inevitable early rise was even harder than usual.

Then one day a travelling circus had come to the village. Sadashiv slipped off after supper on an excuse to fetch water from the well. When he saw the lights, the happy crowds, the rifle-ranges, wrestling matches, swinging boats and helter-skelters, he stayed away from home all night and returned late next day to find his father awaiting him with a stick. But his days of childhood were over. When his father scolded him, he answered back with bitter abuse. The old man raised his stick. Sadashiv grappled with him and felled him to the ground. He lay there groaning, his eyes closed. Then Sadashiv rummaged feverishly under the loose brick where they kept their savings, took out the little bag of coins, and ran off to join the circus. He attached himself to the wrestlers; and, hardened

to iron by years of manual labour, he soon proved himself a champion.

Then he had met that girl . . . just for that one night.

Funny, that had been a sort of turning-point in his life. She had brought him luck: for it was only a few days later that the circus moved to Krishnagad city where he had been seen by Princess Indira.

And then, and then . . . ah, well, two lovely lazy years—what with jewels and silver-knobbed walking-sticks and pearl-hung caps and gorgeous rich food.

He stretched and rolled over on his back. But she was pretty, that girl. So sweet and loving. Wonder who she could have been? Curious, meeting like that. A delicate, pale face and the flame of her great eyes—oh yes, he knew a pretty girl when he saw one. And her body had been so soft, like velvet to the touch; scented and warm and clean, so that to caress it with his roughened hands had seemed almost a sacrilege.

. . . Oh, well, one got used to Princess Indira. There was no good pretending one got any physical pleasure out of a thin dry body, smelling of old clothes and dry wool. But she was kind to him, and he was grateful and fond

of her, and fonder still of his beautiful clothes and scarlet slippers, each tipped with a single emerald.

If she would only give him more presents, instead of bothering him with her mysteries and whispers. . . .

But the old woman, sitting very erect in her chair, stared across the lake and muttered in her harsh, rasping voice, "To-night."



The main streets of the city were hung with flags and bunting. A banner proclaimed, "Welcome, dear Sir." Another, more briefly, "Welcome, dear." Portraits of Raja Shahu, of King Edward VII, of Mr. Gandhi and of President Wilson adorned the various shops. Horses were sprinkled with saffron powder, their necks hung with garlands of yellow flowers, their tails daubed red.

It was the day of Dassera, on which the divine King Rama marched out at the head of the Aryan armies to subdue the demon kingdom of Ceylon. On this auspicious day the Maratha troops had been wont to take the field against their enemies.

Troops lined the streets; at the gateway of the

British Residency a squad of soldiers stood at ease. Presently a bugle blew somewhere within the Residency grounds. The soldiers sprang to attention; a sergeant shouted words of command; they presented arms. The Resident's Morris Colonial swung slowly out of the gate. The Resident himself was driving. His chauffeur sat beside him, very thin and straight. At the back sat his wife with her niece, who was spending a few months in India.

"But will it be really impressive?" the niece was asking.

"My dear, nothing Indians do is impressive," said Mrs. Hilton. "It's all so muddled and tawdry. They never think of details. They've no eye for appearance. Their ceremonies always remind me of a Roman Catholic service in Italy—you know, a long, incomprehensible rigmarole with choirboys spitting all about the place."

"Oh," said the niece primly. She had a mop of tow-coloured hair and was eager and ingenuous. Her name was Phyllis. She had left Cheltenham a few months ago. All she knew of India was derived from Missionary lectures about converts' schools in Madras—lantern slides showing horribly thin creatures, naked and spidery, clutching emaciated infants to

hanging, shapeless breasts. Or the jolly public-schoolish kind of lecture. How we are helping the poor villagers. Fun and uplift in Kashmir. Sad-looking boys standing about angularly on a cricket-field. Mrs. Naidu had once addressed the school. Our Indian sisters. Noble ideals of Hindu marriage. Then there had been that Parsi girl in our house who used to burn cheap cones of incense in the soap-dish in her room. That seemed terribly exciting at the time.

They drove in under the arched gateway. Red-turbaned soldiers presented arms. The Resident raised a yellow-gloved hand slowly to his topi.

In the palace courtyard a red *shamiana* had been erected for the distinguished guests. Ordinary European kitchen chairs, covered with red silk, were ranged in a stiff rank. In front of each chair was a small table with a blue table-cloth and a vase of tightly packed flowers. There was, however, no water in the vases and the flowers were already dead.

"What do we see from here?" asked the Resident's niece.

"I hope you won't be disappointed, Phyllis," answered the Resident, "but I warned you there's nothing much to see. I warned you, remember. But you were so set on coming. These



nobles and feudatory chiefs roll up, in their Daimlers and Alfas, and pop indoors, hand a tray of jewels to the Raja, who'll put his hand on them and return them to their owners. In the evening there'll be a procession through the city to the western gate."

"Why there especially?"

"There's a shami-tree growing there. The Raja picks some of the leaves and gives them to his courtiers. As soon as he touches the leaves they are supposed to turn into gold coins."

"But I think that's a charming idea."

"Seems rather a waste of time to me, really. You've no idea what an expense to the State these processions and festivals are."

Mrs. Hilton adjusted her lorgnettes. "Why, here's Nana Saheb. Now that's a nice old chap. Old-fashioned, courteous manner."

The Brahman, dressed for the occasion in a long English black coat and striped trousers, but still wearing the scarlet gold-tasselled cap of his exalted caste, hurried forward and shook hands effusively.

"Well, Nana Saheb, how are you, how are you?"

"Very well, thank you, sir. And I hope you are too, and also your sweet family members and these charming ladies."

"Yes, thanks very much. Pretty fair, considering. Very warm to-day, what?"

"Oh yes, sir. Simply too hot." He obviously had not noticed it, but now began to fan himself politely with his handkerchief.

"Won't you sit down Nana Saheb?" urged Mrs. Hilton.

"Oh, thank you, sir—I mean Madam Saheb." And he sat down on the very edge of a chair, very thin and erect, peering at each of the Europeans in turn. Like most Indian males he was desperately shy in the presence of European women, and the bony hands on his knees trembled. He would rather have faced an armed and hostile mob than these calm and terrifying ladies.

"Is your name *really* Nana Saheb?" Phyllis asked suddenly. "I mean we all read at school about the Mutiny and that Nana Saheb—I mean . . ."

The Brahman looked blankly at her and then suddenly let off a shrill giggle, "Oh, that was a very bad man. Really a rogue, no doubt."

"You see," the Resident interposed, clearing his throat, "this gentleman's surname is Sukhtankar. Nana is his first name—I almost said Christian name, ha! ha!—yes, Nana, a very common name, I must say, among Brahmans.

As for the Saheb, that's an—ah—an honorific. His brother is called Bala Saheb."

"Exactly—exactly so, sir," broke in Nana Saheb. "You have explained it *vherry* well."

There was a pause.

"No trouble in the State?" asked the Resident. "No Congress agitation?"

Nana Saheb looked deeply shocked.

"Oh no, sir. People in this State are poor, simple persons, quiet as a cow, only wanting to live in peace under the benign British Government, the King Emperor and the Queen Mother. But these Congress people—I don't know *what*." He spread out his hands in a gesture of despair. Then he paused and peered at the Resident. Surely these sentiments would satisfy him?

"Good. Good. I'm glad to hear that," said the Resident vaguely.

Presently Nana Saheb stood up and said with a sort of gasp, "Now I have your permission?"

"Oh yes, my dear fellow. We mustn't keep you. Very glad indeed to have seen you. Hem. Very."

Nana Saheb shook hands, beaming. "Too pleased, too much," he murmured.

"Curious, nerry sort of fellow," commented

Phyllis when the old man was out of sight, "but awfully nice really."

"Shy of us," explained Mrs. Hilton.

"Civil old chap," said the Resident. "*And* loyal. That's rare nowadays, I can tell you. He tells me everything that's going on in the State."

"Look, look!" exclaimed Phyllis. "What are those animals—leopards?"

"Yes," nodded the Resident, "hunting cheetahs."

They were dragged past on silver chains. The muscles rippled under their sleek skin; their keepers strained backwards, shouting directions to each other.

Then came the hawks, each borne on the gloved wrist of a boy. The strange heraldic birds sat rigid, their agate eyes dully agleam. At intervals they ruffled their feathers, crouched and uttered their faint, remote, metallic screech.

Presently the elephants, their tusks painted silver, patterns of red upon their heads and long, swaying, gold-fringed carpets slung across their backs. Several bands (one European brass band, two or three Indian stringed orchestras and a band consisting solely of negro drummers) simultaneously played different tunes in different time.

The nobles and chieftains of the State arrived, sometimes with a trumpeter in the front seat of their car, tooting with melancholy and tuneless persistence, but loudly enough to emphasise the importance of his master. One dignitary, the high priest of some hill temple, came jolting through the gateway in an ancient battered Ford, heralded by a musician in another Ford, who blew with demoniac energy upon an extraordinary horn that wound round and round his body and ended in a vast, gaping cone, pointed at the sky. Dismounting from their cars, the nobles stood about the courtyard in bunches, eyeing each other's jewels, chewing cloves, pan-leaves and betel-nuts, and ejecting streams of scarlet spittle upon the lovely carpets. The bands played indefatigably and deafeningly. A mad elephant confined somewhere in the recesses of the palace roared and trumpeted, like the Minotaur troubling the darkness of Knossian caverns.

The Raja stepped suddenly out of a side door preceded by drummers. Nobles bowed and salaamed, the whole assembly bending forward like corn under the wind; hands were raised to foreheads; voices cried, "*Maharaj, Maharaj, salam O Maharaj!*"

The Raja wandered vaguely among the

groups of courtiers, following his vaguely wandering drummers. All spoke at once, shouting at the top of their voices to make themselves heard. Fans dipped and rose beside the Raja, a scarlet umbrella nodded over his head, a heavy chased-silver sabre clattered along the ground beside him.

When he noticed the Resident, Shahu came over to shake hands. With English people he always made an immense effort and recovered a shadow of his old vivacity.

"How are you? How are you?" he said to the ladies. "It is very good of you to have come. I'm afraid this isn't much of a show I hope you won't be bored."

"I think it's simply fascinating," said Phyllis.

"Would it not be better," suggested the Resident, shouting to be heard, "if those drummers of yours, Raja Saheb, either stopped playing or moved a little farther off?"

The drummers, realising from the Resident's gestures that he was, for some reason, dissatisfied with them, faded away into the crowd. Hidden behind ranks of bulky noblemen they struck up a sudden defiant tattoo, then lost courage and relapsed into idleness.

"Now we shall be moving into the Durbar Hall for the Nazarana ceremony—the ritual of

the present-giving. I may hope for the honour of your company."

"It's very good of you, Raja Saheb"—the Resident consulted his watch—"but, you see, we have to be back for lunch. And my wife feels the heat, you know. We've enjoyed very much indeed what we have seen."

"Enjoyed it *awfully*," added Phyllis, who was afraid the Raja might be offended.

Shahu smiled vaguely.

"It is very kind of you. . . . I was at Oxford, you know," he began, and then broke off.

"Oh yes, how interesting!" Phyllis said encouragingly. "Do tell me about it. What did you think of it?"

"Yes," nodded Shahu, who had already lost interest in the topic, "they were most kind." Kind, ah yes, they had been kind, those young men! Then he had been understood. They had loved him. He had been popular. No one bothered him in those days like fussy old Nana Saheb. Long, lovely summer days on the river with a gramophone. . . . "It is very kind of you too," he added dimly.

He shook hands again and wandered off.

Mrs. Hilton sniffed. "It's a pity. He's let himself go, absolutely. Takes no exercise, drinks, dopes. . . ."

"I think he's rather pathetic," said Phyllis. "He has such disarmingly babyish eyes."

"I say, be careful, my dear girl," broke in the Resident. "Several of these chaps understand English."

"But I didn't say anything insulting."

"I know. Not insulting. But what you said might have been misinterpreted. Anyhow, lower your voice."

"My dear, look at the time," Mrs. Hilton said. "And we've got people in for lunch."

They moved towards their car, red-robed servants clearing a lane for them.

"I think it was a fascinating show," said Phyllis rather defiantly. "I enjoyed every minute of it."

"I always feel," said Mrs. Hilton, "that the average cinema-producer would have made a better show of it."

"But then it wouldn't have been so authentic."

"*Authentic!*" said the Resident, who was having trouble with his gears.

Behind them the blare of the bands faded away. The car bumped down the cobbled streets, between a double file of troops under swaying flags and flickering streamers.

At the Residency the Assistant Resident and



the Anglican chaplain were awaiting them on long basket chairs on the verandah.

"Don't get up," said Mrs. Hilton. "We're frightfully late, I'm afraid. You'll all have cocktails, won't you?"

"Why didn't you come to the Durbar?" Phyllis questioned the Assistant.

The latter made a grimace.

"They're all much the same. See one and you've seen 'em all. Besides," he struck a humorous, public-school attitude expressive of intellectual absorption, "I had work." He turned to the Resident. "Did you see the Raja Saheb, sir?"

"Yes, looking pretty ghastly, he was. I wonder what's the matter with him. Half asleep all the time."

"Probably opium."

"Afraid so. Opium or worse."

"Of course," put in the chaplain, "there's always been a strain of madness in that family. The grandfather was a—what modern psychologists call a sadist. The father was rather a genius, but very wild and eccentric; and it's my opinion the present man is afflicted, poor chap, with a sort of—sort of—melancholic dementia, if you understand me?"

"Is he married?" asked Phyllis.

"Yes," Mrs. Hilton told her. "Handsome girl." She arranged some flowers in a vase on the bamboo table, patted them gently to a level. "She'll be here this afternoon."

Phyllis turned to the chaplain. "Do you find it terribly hard to get to *know* Indians? I've only just come out, you know, and I meet them at these parties . . . but I never seem to get anywhere. What subjects do you find in common?"

The chaplain sighed. How often he had asked himself that very question!

"It's very difficult, Miss Hilton. Indians aren't a bit responsive to friendliness as such. When you first meet them you think they have charming manners; but that doesn't mean anything. They are a gloomy, self-centred people . . . why, they hardly ever laugh. You can go through the bazaar day after day and never see a smile. Always the same drawn, exhausted faces, the blank eyes and drooping mouths. They hate us, you know. . . ."

"Have a cocktail?" said the Resident.

"No. No cocktail for me, Major. Well, thanks very much. Perhaps half a glass of sherry?"

"I always talk to the women about their children," said Mrs. Hilton. "That's the best approach to the women, I'm sure. When I first gave parties for them they used to sit in dumb,

motionless lines along the wall, and I didn't know *what* to talk to them about. If I spoke to one she would giggle nervously; and then the whole line would catch it and they'd all be giggling away like a party of lunatics till I could have screamed the house down. But now I always ask them to bring their children, and I simulate the most *enormous* interest in the horrid little brats—admire all their tawdry, tinselly clothes—and the mothers are all so happy, and chatter away to each other nineteen to the dozen."

The Resident chuckled.

"They *are* a problem, aren't they? Personally, the only one of that palace crowd I ever cared for was that woman—what did they call her?—Indira, yes, Princess Indira—the old Raja's favourite. You never see her about the place now. She lives more or less in retirement. Old and ugly—they *do* age quickly. But, by George! when she was young—she was a fine figure of a woman—not pretty, you know; she always had that huge nose and a sallow complexion—but, h'rm, stately, yes, stately—ought to have worn a picture hat, don't you know. She carried herself like the first Lady Curzon. And she could ride—fancy that, padre, a Hindu woman riding!"

"Yes, indeed, Major, just fancy——"

"Used to ride astride, on a white pony—and she was a damn fine rider too."

"What's the present Rani like?" asked Phyllis.

"Very pretty, don't you think so, sir?" said the Assistant.

"Yes, pretty—oh, *pretty*, I suppose. But I don't think much of her. One of these English-educated Bombay women. Hasn't got the guts of the real Maratha."

"Guts?" broke in Phyllis; "so the women aren't so subdued by purdah and all that?"

"Hindus don't have purdah—not in the South anyway. . . . They are extraordinary, some of these Maratha women," he laughed. "I'll tell you a funny thing. Last week I wanted to see the temple at Madhgaon (I'm trustee for the funds, you know) and I sent word to the *swami* that I was coming. He sent back a fulsome message of welcome. Very well. I went along and the old chap showed me over the place. I noticed he was looking rather low, depressed, don't you know, so I asked him what was up. And what do you think he said? 'Saheb, I am in trouble. My wife has committed a suicide. I had promised to take her into Krishnagad to buy a new dress. Then I got your

esteemed letter, so I told her she must wait till next week. But she was angry and threw herself from the top of that hill.' ”

“What an awful story!” cried Phyllis, but the others all laughed.

It was hot in the verandah.

At their feet the garden blazed with colour. Purple sunbirds chirped and fluttered over beds of scarlet dahlias. A goldmohur-tree with its fernlike leaves and clusters of rust-red blossom drooped above a lotus-covered pool. Blossom-head parrots squawked and tittered in the bushes, and the endless refrain of a brainfever bird was like the very voice of the metallic noon.

“Boy! Isn't lunch ready yet?”

“Yes, Memsahab, quite ready now.”

“Let's go in, shall we? It's stifling out here.”

They trooped in, and silent, barefooted servants moved away the chairs from the verandah and closed the green shutters. The punkah-puller squatted down, attached the cord of the punkah to his big toe, and then, lying on his back, moved his skinny leg slowly to and fro.

The dining-room was cool and dark. Red roses in a silver bowl stirred under the moving fan. Cream-coloured walls and sepia prints in black frames. Lady Butler's Crimean heroes

answered the roll-call, her single horseman reeled amid Afghan solitudes. A melodramatic tiger, labelled "The Monarch," roared behind brown-paper rocks. There was a heavy side-board with silver and cut glass, a whisky tantalus, a fruit-stand, a glass jar for biscuits, a huge tea-kettle.

Between the pictures were heads mounted on polished blackwood, the dates of their securing stamped on silver plaques. Several panthers, a tiger from Indore, a Junagad lion. It was an old joke of the Resident's that his butler had once referred to these trophies as "your honour's faces."

The chaplain said grace and the Resident echoed "Amen" loudly.

Barefooted servants deftly slipped chairs under them as they sat down. A flourish of white napkins, jingling of cutlery, rasp of dry toast crumpled in fidgeting fingers. Mulligatawny soup, inevitable in Anglo-India. Opaque sargassos, sluggishly awash in snowy plates, islets of flaky rice. Silent they bent over their soup, squeezing smooth arcs of lemon; the drops of tart moisture were crystals set in yielding velvet.

"Well, padre," said the Resident, laying down his spoon with a clatter on the empty plate, brushing his moustache sideways and

upwards with his napkin, "well, how's the mission school?"

"Fairly flourishing, thank you Major." The chaplain displayed what he hoped was a brave, wistful smile. If you grumbled, people thought you weren't making the best of things. If you were too cheerful, they said you had a cushy job. Some time, though, he must speak to the Resident about that dispute over the new side-chapel. Endless trivial disputes about nothing. Endless money difficulties. What was the good of it all? The Indians were so suspicious, guarded, obtuse. The lower castes let their children be converted and then expected you to get them highly-paid jobs as servants to European officials. The English came to church on Sunday smelling of brilliantine and eau-de-Cologne and expensive leather prayer-books. The Resident read the lessons in his parade-ground voice. "Hear, oh Israel," and a sharp glance over steel-rimmed spectacles to see if they were hearing as ordered. You had to be careful about the sermons. Nothing but bald and obvious commentary—or there came a hint. "I say, padre—hope you'll forgive my mentioning it—but do you think those were quite the sentiments suitable for—h'rm—native ears?"

Once, ah, once. . . . Youthful enthusiasms and air-winged visions. Splendours of Anglo-Catholic ceremonial, incense and brocaded copes and starry candles in the august gloom of a cathedral. The organ dies away in fluty tremolo and a boy's voice, sweet and ethereal, water-clear, echoes down a sun-dappled nave.

Gone, all gone. . . . Why did he ever come to India? Who could have foreseen the future? It seemed an escape from the trivial round of the parish under an unsympathetic vicar—an exciting crusading adventure—the East. If he had only known! . . . Oh, to get away, to get away. . . . No. Here for ever. Patronising my converts, being patronised by the Resident.

Fish was served. White, tasteless slabs in a neat row. Lettuce and tomatoes, "All from my garden," smiled Mrs. Hilton proudly.

"Really!" The chaplain's surprise was marvellously simulated. But lettuce was good for you. A specific against dysentery and sprue. Except where there was cholera. Shouldn't eat anything raw when cholera is abroad.

The butler bent down confidentially and whispered in the Resident's ear:

"Master take shandy, sir?"

The Resident nodded briskly.

"Shandy? Yes, rather. Capital, capital."



A crest of feathery froth rose silently rimming the mug. He lifted it and the pewter was deliciously cool in his hand.

"Pity we can't get decent ginger-beer in this country."

He drained the mug and sat back with a sigh.

Real English stone ginger. Earthy tang of old ale, welling into a tankard from a cobwebdusted barrel. The parlour of a Somerset inn. His Irish setter panting at his feet, liquid eyes fixed pathetically on his. Edward VII, plumply semitic, peering sideways out of a green-plush frame. A faded daguerreotype of the dear old Queen. Thou God Seest Me. Flowers surrounding an unblinking eye and the infinitely Gothic lettering is branched and corrugated like the woodwork of a garden seat. A breeze ruffles posy-printed curtains, breathing of carnation and sweet-william. Bees moan in the honeysuckle, patter upon the window-panes. Another pint, I think. Those sandwiches make you damn thirsty. That's a fine dog you have, sir. Not a bad old fellow, is he? Must teach him to point in the autumn. Well, on again. Good day sir, and thank you. Good day to you. A summer noon, torrid and superb. Lush meadows and gently rounded hills. Fly-ringed pools in nut-brown oakwoods and the murmurous tumble

of a weir. In the shallow water that streams towards the drop a speckled trout hovers for a moment, then flicks away into blue-misted depths between the furry stems of water-weeds.

"You might give me some more shandy, butler." The Resident mopped his brow covertly. "It's hot to-day. Feels like a touch of thunder in the air."

The plates were changed. Salmis of chicken. Leathery gobbets in brown gravy.

"Good old Indian chicken," said the Resident. "You do long for an English bird sometimes, don't you? I always think of fat white hens in a Cotswold orchard. Looking so clean and well-groomed—not a feather out of place. And then our poor Indian fowls, with their ruffled, pepper-coloured plumage, all neck and legs, scampering about over the village dung-heap."

"Same with the cattle, sir," agreed the Assistant.

"Yes. Jove, some of the cows you see are nothing but a bag of bones. What price a nice Jersey herd out there, swishing in long grass?"

"Fodder's the question, sir, isn't it? No grass at all in this country. Nothing but dead weeds."

"Quite, quite. Oh, it's a weary land, as the psalmist has it, padre."

"That's it, Major. The shadow of great rock in a weary land."

"Aren't you having any chicken, Phyllis?"

"Too hot, Uncle. . . ."

Stewed guaves and custard.

Cheese and biscuits.

"Anyone want any cheese?"

"It's only ordinary soap-cheese," Mrs. Hilton apologised. "You can't get decent cheese except in the middle of the cold weather. Last year we got a lovely Gruyère for Christmas from the Army and Navy Stores in Bombay. It was a treat."

"A Camembert would be nice," said the chaplain. Thick turgid cream oozing out under a crinkly rind. Hunks of French bread and watercress. You'd be eating it in the upper room of a Norman restaurant at a long tresselled table. You kept the same knife and fork all the time. And the smell of rain-sweet vegetables coming up from the market below. That time we went a walking tour in Northern France. Chartres was the best. Those tremendous figures guarding the eastern porch. And the jewelled windows—St. Anne with her black hieratic countenance and blind white eyes like pebbles; Melchizedek, the Asian priest-king, lowering darkly upon a prostrate world; an Aurangzeb trium-

phant over heretic Golconda. . . . D'you remember that Aurangzeb, to maintain the orthodox traditions of apostolic poverty, renounced all earthly possessions and earned what pocket-money he needed by knitting caps for his nobles? Think of that in the most gorgeous court the world has seen. That was the sort of story brought one out to India. . . . And all you found was a dozen wheedling half-castes and a squalid Mission church of yellow brick.

Nobody wanted port, but the decanter circled solemnly.

"Coffee? I must have coffee—black, please," announced the Resident. "I've got to work. By jove, it's nearly two. I must be off to the office. Don't you hurry away, padre. There's a new *Blackwood* just come. In the drawing-room on top of the piano."

The Resident selected a cigar from the side-board and went out.

His office was a square white-walled room. On the walls were survey maps of Krishnagad State and of the Residency cantonment, a coloured map of Bombay Presidency, a large chart indicating the various diseases that may afflict Indian crops, a coloured diagram illustrating the chief distinctions between poisonous

and non-poisonous snakes, and an enormous painting of a locust with instructions for coping with this pest. On the floor were colourless carpets made at the local jail. The furniture consisted of a chair with arms for the Resident, a chair without arms for official Indian visitors, and a large deal table covered with green baize whereon lay a multitude of official knick-knacks—rulers and protractors, bottles of red ink and green ink and violet ink, coloured pencils, paper-weights, desk diaries, pen-rests and pen-wipers, glass safety inkpots, pencil-sharpeners and ink-erasers and indiarubbers. Between rusty tin book-rests reposed forbidding volumes bound in black cloth, the backs gnawed by rats, the pages riddled by maggots: Volumes Twenty-Nine to Thirty-Four of *Bombay Acts and Regulations* for the period Eighteen Seventy-Five to Eighteen Eighty-Four, the *Bombay Gazetteer*, and Murchison's monumental work, *Feudatory Chiefs of Krishnagad State and their Treaties with the Durbar*.

On the Resident's entry a red-coated servant at the outer door shouted officiously to the punkah coolie, and the tattered dusty fan jerked into life. An army of flies, who had settled along the punkah ropes, rose in a murmurous cloud.

Whew, it was hot! In the garden the brain-fever bird called with maddening iteration.

The Resident sat down, drew up his trousers, arranged a few pencils in proper order, and opened the *Times of India* which lay neatly folded on his blotter.

Hullo, another communal riot. The usual cause, of course. Hindus threw some unclean pork into a mosque—Muslims retaliated by slaughtering cows and flinging the mangled pieces into a Hindu shrine. Casualties more or less equally divided. One enterprising Muslim wormed his way inside a Hindu possession and did a lot of damage with his knife before he was detected and beaten to a pulp.

On the next column was reported a powerful speech, lasting five and a half hours, delivered by Pandit Hansraj at a Congress meeting in Bombay. The speaker, after perfervid denunciation of the satanic English, addressed an appeal to British fair-play, demanding the immediate grant of independence to India and the payment of an indemnity to be assessed by the Congress, together with a solemn guarantee of the continued protection of India by the British Army and Navy.

Well, really. The Resident mopped his brow. What hogwash these chaps talk! Do they mean it or do they enjoy talking for the sake of talking? I don't understand it at all.

He turned to the leaders, which he always read with attention. Their style was copied from that of the *London Times* and appeared to him a model of weighty argument. Pandit Hansraj's recent outburst was here dealt with from an immense height, his errors of fact pointed out, his inconsistencies underlined. Yes, yes. But the natives who heard that donkey's speech won't ever read this article—and anyway he's probably already made another longer and more violent speech even before the type for this article was set up.

Next he turned to the correspondence. "Pro Bono Publico" urged the Government to take a strong line. "An Indian Loyalist" pointed out that the landowning class valued the British connection. "Old Contemptible" wondered when the Government would recognise the just claims of the Eurasian community and satisfy their demand for increased representation in the public services. The Dean of Attock related an amusing joke made by a former Bishop of Bombay—or was it made by the Suffragan Bishop of Rangoon?—the writer could not remember, and anyway the point of the joke seemed to have been mislaid. "Mother of Six Bonny British Children" explained that Mr. Gandhi was quite wrong in attributing to his seditious movement

any trace of love. Real love was shown by Indians in the devotion to the British officials and, above all, by ayahs in their loving care of the baby sahebs.

On a back page occurred a brief obituary notice of the latest Englishman to be assassinated in Bengal.

The Resident folded up the paper with a sigh of discontent.

Everything seemed to be wrong nowadays. Compare India thirty years ago with India now. What had happened to England? He felt utterly out of touch with the younger generation. When he went up to Simla he found the suave young secretaries who surrounded the ark of Government speaking a jargon unintelligible to him. They had racing-cars and smart flats; but when they spoke of "India," it was of a different country to the one in which he had served so long.

He couldn't cope with their facile chatter about democracy and "village uplift" and "training the inarticulate in self-expression." And they soon lost interest in him. He was an old foggy, a backwoods Resident, buried in some down-country State. Oh yes, you had to have all this Reform claptrap on the tip of your tongue if you wanted to get on nowadays. Well,



he was too old to change now—too old to be ambitious.

. . . But sometimes I wish for my wife's sake we could get a station with more English people. It's deuced lonely and dull for her here. I'd like a Moslem State if I had my choice. Don't care for these Southern Hindus. Secretive, sullen beggars.

And their beastly religion. I mean to say, one wants to be broad-minded and all that—but this idol-worshipping and eating of cows' dung and washing in cows' urine—well, it makes you feel sick. Makes you long to see one of those grey-towered churches in an English village. Just a glimpse, don't you know, to take the taste out of your mouth. Yes. Yellow pools of sunshine between blue-shadowed pillars, and coming in through open windows the smell of hawthorn in bloom.

But the Northern Muslims are different chaps altogether, especially the Baluchis and the Persians.

He had been Political Agent in Makran before the War. He lived in an old rambling barracks with mud walls, rough crenellation black against a lemon sky. Rolling hills falling away in dim rounded waves. Along the ridge of the hilltop a few cairns of ghost-white stone. From

there on a fine day you could catch the glint of the sea. A hard tang in the air. At night the sudden scream of a sea-bird. A lonely place. A shepherd hurries along the skyline with his flock, anxious to reach home before the night. A negro with a spear stands on guard at the entrance of a stockaded village. Stone, straw-roofed huts, surrounded with walls of unhewn Pelasgic stone, crowning the summits of bleak hills. The *sardars* in white, enormous turbans. And the tribesmen, tall and olive-pale, with slender hands and feet. Their turbans were gay with a fan-shaped knot on top; and they wore home-spun shirts of red and green, and vast, black Turkish trousers. Friendly and gentle in manner, smilingly courteous; but proud and bitter in dispute and murderous in revenge.

. . . I used to get on very well with them. Riding and shooting. Some young Persians taught me hawking. Curious they looked with the hawks perched on their wrists like some old medieval painting in a museum at home. They would take their hawks to the sparse cotton-fields along the mountain streams. . . . A plump black partridge rises with a whirr like clock-work. Quick! Quick! They loose the hawk with a shout. There she goes—lean, brown and shark-like in flight—leaping towards her prey

with powerful wing strokes, while the starlings and sparrows scatter madly before her terrible advance. Look, the partridge dips, rises, swerves away up to the right. But the hawk's almost underneath him. She beats up after him, silent and relentless. Then, wheeling in on one wing, she swings crashing in upon the screaming partridge and, half folding her long scimitar wings, strikes downwards with the demoniac violence of a cobra. Now she sinks slowly to earth, clutching in her claws a shuddering little body, and around her is a flutter of tiny black and golden feathers. . . .

Yes, great sport it was. It's a wonder Europeans haven't taken it up. Of course, they're awfully delicate creatures, those hawks. Those young Persians used to spoil them. Each bird had her own string cot, a silver chain upon her foot. They would be fed by hand with raw meat twice a day. Then they'd sit there, still and gorged, blinking amber eyes and uttering occasionally their tiny, rasping screech.

During the War he had been despatched to hold Fort Neill in the Khanate of Kalat. A yellow blockhouse in a wilderness of hills. He saw no Europeans for four years. He had no books to read, no papers. The only view from the barred window of his office was of the grave-

yard where reposed his less fortunate predecessors. A mile away rose the vast hills of the Osman range, like whorls of molten metal. Upon them was not a tree, not a blade of grass, no water nor any shadow, not even the soft grey film of dust, nothing but the bare and polished bones of the mountain. At night they loomed gigantic, menacing, blotting out half the sky. In the ashen moonlight the great spurs of the range stood out like the ribs of skeletons, the profound gulfs between yawned back into abysmal gloom. In the courtyard his Pathan soldiers crouched round a fire; and when that burned low they pulled their sheepskin cloaks round them and fell asleep, lying huddled on the hard earth. The fire flickered out and there was only a ruin of smouldering ash. In the aching silence there was no sound or sign of life, nothing but the tremendous procession of the stars. The fort crouched half-hidden in sand, and an occasional small wind blew puffs of white dust against the crumbling walls, arrows of an everlasting and relentless siege.

At last an aeroplane flew over and dropped a letter announcing the Armistice and ordering Hilton to withdraw to Quetta. For the last time he reviewed his little troop in the courtyard. They hauled down the Union Jack and started

their six days' march across the inhospitable hills.

And when they were but forty miles from Quetta a despatch-rider had galloped up with an order to return to Fort Neill since war had broken out with Afghanistan.

For a moment he had stood there stunned, then had collapsed on to a boulder and wept like a child. The soldiers stood in a circle around him, silent, awed. Vultures circled slowly in a cloudless sky. A cluster of turbans along the crest of an ochre hill betrayed a group of watching tribesmen.

When he recovered and gave the word to return, the soldiers shouldered their rifles and, with but a sigh and a sad glance back at Quetta, of whose bazaars and women they had dreamed so long, trudged back without a word.

In their absence Baluchis had pillaged the fort, leaving only a smoking ruin. A shelter of dried grass was now his sole protection from the sun. It became harder to get provisions. The tribesmen grew insolent, convinced of the garrison's weakness. Even the friendly clans, who had formerly brought baskets of fruit and a few young fowls, now withdrew into moody silence. In the villages a young mullah was preaching a holy war against the infidel. His soldiers be-

came restless and uneasy. Another month, two months, four months; and then, thank God, the final relief. . . .

His reverie was interrupted by a burst of rapid whispering at the door. He knew what it was—his head clerk enquiring of the servants whether the Saheb were busy or ready to receive him.

Slowly a single eye appeared round the door, withdrawing again like a flash. More whispering. The head clerk then removed to some distance and returned, walking noisily, as if arriving for the first time. This farce was repeated daily.

The head clerk now came briskly in, salaamed and stood at attention, carrying under his arm a portfolio of files neatly docketed and tied with red tape.

Each file consisted of some enquiry, relating to details of the Resident's administrative work, which had filtered slowly down through the innumerable strata of the bureaucratic hierarchy, each successive official forwarding it on to his inferior "with compliments for enquiry and report." Endless questions in the Legislative Assembly (ranging from the wicked export of lizard-skins to make shoes for shameless Euro-

pean women, to the horrid lack of lavatories at wayside stations) were copied out and despatched in showers to the provincial secretariats, there to be recopied and redistributed among the district officials, whose duty it was to collect the information upon which the Government spokesmen would in due time base their replies to the original questions.

The head clerk had made neat little pencil notes upon each file, collected and attached with red ribbon all previous correspondences of any relevance, and had prepared a draft of the answer he considered it proper for the Resident to return.

He laid the bulky portfolio on the table. After doing this he usually retired until the Resident had studied the files, made his own notes thereon, and radically rewritten the draft submitted for his approval. But to-day he hovered uncertainly at the edge of the table, nervously hitching up the folds of his *dhoti* to expose a fat, hairless calf and a pair of decorative sock-suspenders. His Adam's-apple quivered and he mopped his brow with the end of his white scarf.

The Resident recognised these symptoms. He's going to make a request of some sort. I only hope it's not about that nephew of his again.

"Well, what is it?"

"Sir, I have a question to ask your honour."

"Right. Fire ahead."

"Sir, my question is this. Sir, I know that your honour will pardon me for asking it."

"Well, hurry up. . . ."

The head clerk gave a gulp and began to gabble, "Sir, supposing that the present Raja Saheb were to die——"

"Why on earth should he?"

A pause.

"Sir, your honour knows that our Raja Saheb is in very weak state of health."

"He's not very fit, of course. But nothing to be alarmed about."

"In the bazaar some astrologers are saying he will not survive long. This is very bad news and we will hope not true. But, sir, supposing——"

"Yes, yes; get on, man. Supposing he dies—which I sincerely hope he won't—what then?"

"Sir, whom would the benign British Government be likely to recognise as Regent during the minority of the Yuvraj?"<sup>1</sup>

"Who?—Regent? I suppose, oh, I suppose the present Rani Saheb——"

"Yes, sir. Of course, just as your honour says. . . ."

<sup>1</sup> Heir Apparent.



He stood irresolute, fiddling with the buttons of his coat, nervously twitching.

“Well, is that all?”

“Sir, would not the Government consider the case of the Princess Indira? She is a very poor, good, unfortunate lady, much beloved by persons everywhere. . . .”

“Indira? H’m. She used to be a fine, vigorous lady. But she’s old now. And the Rani Saheb is the proper person. Her claims couldn’t be passed over. Oh Lord, no.”

“Sir, if Government asked for your honour’s recommendation——”

“Look here, I can’t go on discussing the matter with you. Just wait outside, will you? I’ll run through these papers.”

The clerk gave a very low salaam and slipped out.



Nana Saheb stepped wearily from his carriage and went through a low doorway into the courtyard of his house—like all Hindu houses an assemblage of ramshackle buildings grouped about a colonnaded courtyard, having a deep well in the centre.

He was tired after the long ceremonial of the Durbar, and sticky and hot in his European

clothes. He took off his Brahmanic cap and began unbuttoning his coat. Ah, what a relief to be rid of these stuffy bandages!

His three sons came out of the shadows of the colonnade, took off their slippers and, bending down, touched their father's feet.

"Well," he asked them in English, "have you done well at school to-day? Eh?"

The boys smiled at each other, wriggled their toes, twisted and twined their fingers nervously.

"*Aré*, what is this? Are you dumb? Have you become swines and reptiles that you cannot speak?"

The eldest boy began haltingly in English. "We—have—done—well, sir."

"Oh, and who says so, you or your master? Oh master, eh master, oh masterrr" (he pretended to call out, his hands cupping his mouth), "how have these rascals done? What, what! Tch, tch. They are too bad? I knew it, I knew it!" And he smiled benignly at the three boys, who laughed and wriggled with embarrassment. "There, there, my children. Run along to your mother. You have said your noon prayers? Good, good."

Nana Saheb now stripped himself of his English clothes and gave them to a young Brahman who stood leaning shyly against one

of the carved wooden pillars of the colonnade. Like all high-caste Hindus, Nana Saheb had a number of young Brahman students in his house who were half servants and half members of the family, helping in the household work in return for food and the expenses of education. The young Brahman brought him a thin cotton *dhoti*<sup>1</sup> which he wound about his loins.

“Draw water from the well,” said Nana Saheb, and the youth filled a brass pot and set a wooden stool beside it.

Nana Saheb stepped on to the stool and splashed himself from head to foot till the water ran in rivulets down his hairless chest and his *dhoti* clung to his narrow buttocks. Closing his eyes he murmured, “I do wash me in this holy essence, water, in the sight of Heaven, that I may thereby remove the guilt of sins that I have this day committed. For I have sinned in word and in thought, in touching and in not touching, in knowing and in not knowing, in eating and in fasting, in drinking and in not drinking. . . .”

Then, lifting a handful of water in his cupped hands to the level of his eyes, he sang in a soft, far-away voice the famous hymn beginning, “Do thou, sweet water, child of Vishnu, cleanse us from all sin.”

<sup>1</sup> The divided skirt of Hindu male attire.

He lowered his hands to the level of his mouth and slowly sipped the water, repeating at each sip the twenty-four names of the Creator.

“Glory to Kesava, to Narayana, to Vishnu. . . .”

And as he drained the last drops he said:

“I take into my body this holy water that flows from the feet of God.”

Joining the palms of his hands together he moaned out the sacred syllable “*Om!*”

Then, standing erect, he shouted “Earth! Air! Sky!”

Turning his face to gaze at the sun, he murmured the ancient Gaytri Prayer:

“I meditate on the marvellous glory of our Lord the Sun, the Divine Creator. O may He enlighten my understanding.”

The young Brahman brought him ochre powder in a silver bowl, and Nana Saheb smeared two broad vertical lines upon his brow. These represented the feet of Vishnu, which the devout desire to be imprinted on their foreheads. He then shed his white cotton *dhoti* and robed himself in one of purple silk and folded about his shoulders a shawl of cloth of gold.

He went into the family chapel and squatted down before a low stool on which was laid a

silver tray. Round the tray were grouped a black stone, the symbol of Vishnu; a white stone, the symbol of Shiva; a red stone for Ganesh, Lord of Obstacles; a small triangle of metal ore for Parvati, Queen of Heaven; a round crystal, symbol of the Sun; a small bell and a conch. On the silver tray were a pile of basil leaves and a pile of bilva leaves, a little mound of rose petals and a pot of perfumed oil. Nana Saheb laid the basil leaves upon the black stone and the bilva leaves upon the white; and upon the other sacred symbols he poured perfumed oil and cast a handful of rose petals. Then he bowed to the conch, with hands clasped under his chin, and said:

“O Conch, thou wast born in the deep abyss of Ocean, and art held by Vishnu in the hollow of his hand; receive my homage.”

And to the bell he prayed:

“O Bell, sweet Bell, ring out the entry of the Gods and the flight and confusion of Demons. I offer perfumed oil and roses to thee, holy Bell.”

Now the ceremony of formal worship was finished. You had to be most careful to follow every detail according to the ancient ritual, revealed in ages past to the Brahmans by the very gods themselves. Only by accurate atten-

tion to this complex ritual could you attain peace and the hope of a happy rebirth. Every error was a loophole for the demons that swarmed in the air about you, watching, crouching in the shadows, malevolently alert.

So Nana Saheb rose and prayed the final prayer:

“O God, pardon my ignorance and the sins that I commit ceaselessly night and day. There is no other succour but in Thee; Thou only art my refuge; guard me and defend me by Thy mercy. With my prayers I offer these little flowers.”

As he left the chapel with happy, confident step, he cried out in a resonant chant:

“Let earth and air and sky be favourable to this house! Peace! Peace! Peace! Homage to our Lord Vishnu!”

He walked along the colonnade to a low doorway topped with a silver image of Ganesh, kicked off his sandals at the doorstep, and entered the bare, whitewashed room that was his dining-room. There was no furniture here; the floor was washed with cow dung which had hardened to a fibrous carpet; and along the wall were four flat stools. Beside each stool was set a silver jar of water, and in front a wide banana leaf; and round the banana leaf the

women of the house had drawn intricate designs with coloured chalk.

Nana Saheb's three sons awaited him, bare-footed.

He smiled at them, squatted down on his stool and signed to them to follow suit.

Nana Saheb's wife entered the room, followed by her daughters. Each carried a silver tray piled with food; and going first to Nana Saheb, each lifted handfuls of saffron rice, of salt rice and sweet rice, of rice with raisins and almonds, and of rice fried in butter with onions and peas, and set them in neat little rows along the edge of the banana leaf. Over the little mounds of rice they poured spices of cucumber and cream, of potatoes boiled in treacle, of maize fried in butter, of apples and mangoes stewed with honey.

The women then passed on and served the three boys, who waited, squatting in silence, with downcast heads. Not a word was spoken. The bare feet of the women padded softly over the dry powdery cow dung on the floor; their bracelets jingled as they bent forward to arrange the neat piles of rice symmetrically around the rim of the banana leaves.

When the women had withdrawn, Nana Saheb lifted his silver jar of water (his sons

copying his every movement) and sipped, again repeating the twenty-four names of the Creator. Wetting his hands, he sprinkled a circle of water round the outside of his banana leaf. This was to be a charmed circle within which he might eat, secure from the assaults of demons. But to appease the malevolence of the Princes of Darkness he placed morsels of rice in a line beyond the circle of water, saying as he did so:

“Homage to Sitra, Lord of Purgatory, and to Yama, God of Death.”

For a Hindu must eat religiously as he must perform religiously every action in his life, whether being born or dying or sleeping with his wife. Not for a moment must he suspend his vigilance; for only by the unfailing observation of this all-embracing ritual has he attained his present caste, and even a moment's unwary relaxation of endeavour may bring the penalty of relapse into a lower birth.

Sometimes in his schooldays Nana Saheb had discussed the tyrannous control of Hinduism with his Brahman fellow-students. They would be sitting cross-legged in his cubicle drinking tea till midnight. The camp-bed and deck-chair, the room's sole furniture, had been packed away in the corridor; and the boys squatted round the tea-urn in the light of a single smoky hand-



lamp. Many of the students were fanatic in enthusiasm for Western progress. It was the age of Justice Ranade and Badrudin Tyebji—the first intellectual stirrings after the torpor succeeding the Mutiny *débâcle*. They spoke of Herbert Spencer, of Mazzini and Prince Kropotkin, and cried out that religion was the curse of India. So they argued, flushed with youthful ideals, till the sky paled with dawn, and Nana Saheb would bid them farewell on his doorstep, and watch their slim, white-clad figures fading into the gloom of the quadrangle, while a soft morning wind rustled the tall palms. He had often been carried away by their infectious enthusiasm, but only for a while. The rigid discipline of his faith was in his very blood. He had never so much as touched a biscuit made by the hands of non-Hindus. And as he grew older, his distrust of “progress,” of facile agnosticism, and of Western sentimentalism deepened. As for politics—they were the resort of knaves. The man who had a job was quiet; the man who had no job but wanted one became a politician. The English were, no doubt, barbarous foreigners—but Heaven had granted them victory. Like all empires that history tells of, theirs would fall into inevitable decay; and a violent destruction of their authority might also weaken the auth-

ority of the Hindu hierarchy. Reverence, obedience and submission—these were the duties of mankind—of the Brahman to the gods, of all other castes to the Brahman. . . .

Once the ceremonies preparatory to eating were concluded, Nana Saheb looked up and began chatting with his sons.

“And what Sanskrit book are you reading now, Vasudeo?” he asked his eldest son.

“We are doing *Sakuntala*.”

“Ah, what a marvellous play! The very summit of our Indian drama.”

“At the end of term we are to act scenes from it on breaking-up day. The Resident Saheb has promised to attend and give away the prizes.”

“And who is acting in it?”

“I am! I am!” the youngest boy piped up. “I am taking the part of one of Sakuntala’s maiden attendants who comforts her in the forest. I have to say these lines.” He repeated the moaning Sanskrit verses. “Do I say them well?”

“Ugh! Tch!—as badly as a low-caste shoemaker.” And the other two boys laughed at the youngest, who subsided into silence. He should not have spoken before his father addressed him.

"But what about your games, Bal?" Nana Saheb addressed his second son, who was the athlete of the family and had played tennis for his college against the Parashrambhau College of Poona. Now he was being tried out for the football eleven.

"The games master was quite pleased with me—but I do wish I could have a proper pair of boots . . . and even a pair of football shorts? . . . it hurts my toes playing in sandals, and many of the boys do have boots and shorts nowadays."

"Tch! And then you'll want an English suit and a straw hat and a wrist-watch—I know you boys—football boots, what an idea!" And he hunched up his shoulders and appeared to be quite disgusted. But he was very proud of Bal's athletic powers, and presently he added, "These boots—where does one buy them?"

"Oh, any of the European stores in Poona—quite cheap—and they last ever so long. . . ." The boy leant forward eagerly.

"Well, we shall see, we shall . . . Boots, indeed!"

When the meal was over, Nana Saheb rose, washed his face, head, arms and feet most carefully, and then strolled down the colonnade.

In one room his two eldest daughters (who could never eat with their father and brothers, according to Hindu custom) were having an English lesson from an aged pandit. The old man's accent was based on an inaccurate imitation of that of the pandit who had taught *him*, and would have been unintelligible to most Englishmen.

He was teaching the girls poetry.

"How dott de little beese bee!" he sang nasally through constricted nostrils. The girls repeated the line in chorus.

They made a pretty picture bending over the table, their blue-black hair tied neatly over the nape of the neck and set with a few white rose petals. They frowned and pouted, struggling with the outlandish syllables.

In the next room Nana Saheb's wife, the Bai Saheb, was sitting with her two youngest daughters. She rose at Nana Saheb's entrance—as did the two girls—and she clasped her hands together under her chin, which is the Brahman gesture of greeting.

He returned her salutation with the same gesture and squatted down, took a handful of dry spices from a fold of his purple *dhoti*; cardamums, cloves and betel-nuts rasped drily in the palm of his hand; he began to chew them

slowly. The women sat down opposite him, but remained silent till he should address them.

"What were you talking about?" he asked.

"I was telling the girls about the *satis* of old days, and how a faithful Hindu widow always burned herself upon the pyre of her dead husband."

Nana Saheb nodded. "Those were wonderful heroic days."

"But didn't the fire hurt very much?" the elder of the two girls asked him.

"They never noticed it, or thought of it," said Nana Saheb. "My grandfather saw his mother go to the fire, and he told us that she never flinched or winced. She knelt there with her husband's head on her lap, and the flames caught her silken robes, and they saw her arm shrivel and blacken, and her hair caught alight, and the air was full of the smell of burning flesh, but she smiled, smiled, smiled all the time, and never moved."

"Well," cried the younger girl, pouting and tossing her head, "I shouldn't like it at all. In England women never did that. A girl at school was telling me that the women there are as free as the men and can play tennis and choose their own husbands."

"Possibly," said her mother; "but since in

England the people are barbarous, it cannot possibly concern a Brahman how they behave."

"You are a wild, mischievous girl," Nana Saheb shook his finger at the child, pretending to be angry, "and we shall marry you off at once to a very old man who will never give you any children but will beat you all day long with a huge stick."

For a moment the child looked frightened, but seeing the twinkle in Nana Saheb's eyes she ran over to him. He caught her in his arms and began kissing her, smoothing her soft dark hair and pinching her plump wheat-coloured arms.

Presently he rose, saluted his wife with the same ceremonious gesture, and went to his study—a bare wide room with no furniture but a long bolster against the wall and a beautiful Bijapur carpet upon which were sundry papers and a new American typewriter.

Nana Saheb squatted down upon the carpet, leant his back against the bolster, put on a pair of horn-rimmed spectacles, and drew the typewriter towards him. He always devoted an hour a day to a commentary he was writing on Kautilya's famous manual of statecraft, the *Arthashastra*. He had all his life delighted in that great statesman-philosopher's hard logic and biting cynicism; and now, after a lifetime of

politics, his ambition was to edit the masterpiece with notes drawn from his own experience.

Sitting in that quiet room he soon forgot the tedious, petty problems of daily administration and was carried back to the marvellous India of the Maurya emperors, when Chandragupta reigned gloriously at Patna and a Macedonian princess was Empress of India. He could almost see the splendour of that extraordinary court—the enormous palace guarded by a battalion of Greek women, the finest archers in Asia, whose breasts had been burnt off so as not to impede the drawing of the bow—the city renowned for its three hundred universities, whither men came from all the nations of the world to drink from the fountain of Indian wisdom—the city whose boundless wealth amazed even the prosperous Hellenes of Alexandria.

Kautilya, the brain behind that tremendous monarchy, had in old age noted down in cold, clear Sanskrit his opinions on the art of government. And Nana Saheb, squatting in his empty, whitewashed study, tapped away on his typewriter and commented admiringly on Kautilya's incalculable wisdom and foresight.

Often he chuckled to himself as phrase after phrase struck with the force of its author's genius.

“How did he know?—how could he foresee that? Why, I remember a case only the other day . . .”

But after a while his fingers slackened. He felt tired and uneasy to-day. There was a vague depression weighing on his mind. What was it? The Durbar had gone off well enough. So far as he knew there was no hitch in the preparation for that evening’s procession. His Highness had not looked worse than usual to-day—a little better if anything. If only . . .

If only one knew whither Fate was leading them all. His Highness—what would happen in the end? Would he linger on for years? or would there be a sudden collapse?

And the Rani Saheb?—ah, there was a fine lady—quiet and determined, heroically patient after the old Indian tradition. He admired her more than he could say. If anything—if anything happened, she would make a splendid Regent. . . .

But what was Princess Indira doing? The reports of his spies had been very unfruitful of late. But always he was conscious of her aggressive existence, a heavy cloud of menace on the borders of his life. She had once approached him . . . she would never forgive his scornful refusal to be drawn into her intrigues, his loyalty



to the royal house. He would not live long if she triumphed. . . . But what was she doing now? The very fact that he could get no positive news about her made him afraid. Ah, if only there were a resolute ruler, a real head of the State, Princess Indira would not have troubled the world so long. . . .

He heard Bal calling him: "Nana Saheb! Nana Saheb!"

"Yes, what is it?" He hated being disturbed when in his study.

Patter of naked feet along the colonnade.

A tattoo on his door.

"Yes, yes. I'm coming."

He unlatched the door.

One of his spies was leaning against the doorpost, panting, hand clapped to his waist, groping for breath.

"Nana Saheb—there is to be a rising to-night—they will kidnap the Raja. . . . Forgive me, I have been running . . . so much."

He sank down, head lolled upon his chest.

Nana Saheb took him by the shoulders and lifted up his head.

"It is Princess Indira?" he whispered.

The man nodded, gasping.

"And that wrestling boy of hers?"

Another nod.

Nana Saheb straightened himself. His yellow eyes were very bright.



The punkah swoops loosely overhead, the ropes tighten—chug!—and the punkah flutters back.

. . . Edge is getting very tattered and one of those ropes is fraying. There's a spider's web up in that corner—those servants will never learn.

Dorothy Hilton sighed and turned over on her back, hands clasped under her neck. Can't get to sleep this afternoon. Ought to have taken some aspirin. But aspirin always makes me perspire. And I'm too hot already. These October days are often the worst in the year. Look at those flowers there. I picked them fresh this morning in the garden, and they're withered already; the water in the vase gets warm I suppose.

. . . Nice girl Phyllis is. It's really a joy to have her here. Someone to talk to about clothes. Borrow the new novels she's brought out with her. I do think the way she does her hair is delightful. It's the fashion now, she says. . . . I hate looking at myself in the glass, my hair looks so awful. But what can you do? No decent hairdresser nearer than Bombay.

Oh, well. I've stood India for nearly ten years now. One gets accustomed to everything.

But what a shock it was at first.

Her impressions of India had been moulded on Kipling and the Anglo-Indian stories of various lady novelists. Beautiful and haughty ladies with picture hats, sequin gowns and tall sticks. Rickshaws, gold lace, viceregal receptions, innumerable stately youths with the grey eyes and firm mouths of Empire-builders. . . .

Oh, easy enough to laugh about now. But all that had seemed likely enough to her as she sat curled up on the sofa in her bedroom in the house in the country where she had spent her childhood.

A dull, comfortable house of mid-Victorian design, of sulphur-coloured stone, set half-way up a hill. The vast empty hall of all such houses, a single table in the centre covered with a few odd volumes of bound *Punch*. A forest of walking-sticks in the umbrella-stand by the door. On the red-papered walls gold-framed oil paintings of cattle grazing darkly in a fog; of an old mill-wheel, barely visible, churning a stream of woolly brown; a pyramid of fruit and pheasants by an anonymous Dutchman; and a reputed Carlo Dolci.

Her room upstairs, though, was lovely. Airy

—bright with flowered wall-paper. A tinkling marble clock on the mantelpiece, red plush footstools, needlework chairs and coloured prints of Academy pictures. Mr. Farquharson's Highland sheep emerged inevitably from a pink mist; Mr. Tuke's bathing boys exposed modest backs on a sun-drenched beach.

From her window she overlooked the garden. A long lawn bordered by Scotch firs, and in the distance the faint flush of ling in bloom. . . . She could still smell the odour of new-mown hay, of green apples ripening in whitewashed attics, of jasmine on summer evenings; of the white hyacinths in their glazed bowls on the drawing-room table.

There would be tennis-parties. Heavy middle-aged men and tow-headed girls. The latter naively hilarious, their voices grown harshly loud from endless converse with deaf uncles and aunts.

Or she would go calling with her mother—curious to see the new people at Thornby—overlooking the Tudor cottage the Websters had taken for the summer. . . . Helping her mother to pile the bottled raspberries on the larder shelf. Green bottles with tight-screwing brass tops. Sorting out things for the jumble sale at

the Vicarage. Addressing envelopes for the Conservative Fête. Bicycling over to the village on winter afternoons to change a book at the library and to practise carols with the ladies' Musical Society.

They lived very quietly during the War, of course. But in the spring of 1920 Aunt Ella had asked her up to London for the season.

A tall yellow Kensington *palazzo*—sedately ranged with a score of others round a Kensington square. Dorothy looked out of her lace-framed window over the trees and the little garden of the square constricted by high rusty railings. Between the unkempt lilacs a nursemaid promenaded her charges over the patchy grass. A hurdy-gurdy whined plaintively. In the distance you could hear excitingly the muffled roar of traffic down Kensington Road. In the evenings you heard the band playing in the Park, and when night fell the sky was murkily aflame.

Aunt Ella had asked Hilton to tea. "I didn't know he was in England till I met him the other day in Bond Street. I used to see quite a lot of him in the old days in Gloucestershire. Such a nice boy he was. But I hardly recognised him now. So thin and ill he looked."

But Dorothy thought him distinguished. Lean and brown, very serious and confiding. He told her about his work and she was flattered by his grave attention.

He would return to India as a Resident in some native State, he told her. He had asked to be sent to a South-country station with a mild climate. He needed that after his four years' grilling at Fort Neill. His wife would be the senior lady in the station.

. . . And how was I to know what an empty distinction that would be, if there were no other English ladies in the station?

Oh, the difference between the India of fiction and the India of reality! The loneliness and boredom of it.

And when you went to Bombay for a holiday it was almost worse. Everyone had their own little set; immersed in bridge-parties and in the local gossip. You felt horribly out of it. And the awful steaming heat of Bombay seemed to drain away your very life.

Of course, there had been her two little boys. But they had had to be left at home in England, when still little more than babies.

And George seemed to become more and more absorbed in his work. He had never been

passionate; and since she had never been stirred by him, the cessation of physical union had been of little moment in her life. But she did sometimes long for a little affection, even if simulated, something more than the brisk, busy pat on the head or perfunctory kiss. And there was none of the usual consolation for a married woman, no pleasant domestic routine, no attractive little house to look after. The hideous red-brick barracks of the Residency was as impersonal as a cathedral. You couldn't have nice English carpets or books or pretty furniture, for the white ants ate everything—and if you had china that you valued, the servants would be sure to smash it.

It had been a great event when an English Assistant Resident arrived. They had had none since the War. George was as excited as a boy. Somebody to shoot and ride with. Jove, he must get some more whisky up from Bombay, order a new pair of riding-breeches, get some tennis balls.

Even Dorothy caught the infection of interest. And when he arrived she was delighted to find him charming—a handsome young subaltern, with pink-and-white complexion and smooth flaxen hair brushed back. He had pleasant, easy

manners and a soft voice. Ian Somervell—a nice name, too.

. . . Of course, she only thought of him with a sort of motherly affection. Anything else would have been absurd. Absurd. But she loved it when he consulted her and asked her advice about everything. She loved to remember the funny wrinkle in his forehead when he was worried, his radiant smile of gratitude when she gave him advice or helped him in something.

He had brought a gramophone with him and she had asked him to show her the latest dance steps. They had foxtrotted on the verandah; and when the record died into a throaty rasp, she broke away breathless, laughing.

Really it was silly the way one remembered things—one's mind dwelling over the most trivial details. . . .

A nice girl, Phyllis.

The poor old Residency's quite waking up. Four English people in the station—well, five, counting the chaplain.

A tap at the door.

"Who is it?"

"It's me, Aunt Dorothy. Can I come in?"

"Do, my dear. I haven't started to dress



yet. Goodness, it's nearly five! People will be arriving soon."



Princess Usha was dressing in her room.

She liked these garden parties at the Residency. They were a break in the monotony of her life, moments of release from the dusty, airless wilderness of the palace. She liked the comfort of the Residency, the clean bright rooms with English wall-paper and chintz curtains, polished rosewood tables and silver vases. The commonplaces of English furnishing seemed to her novel and delightful. She liked the carefully landscaped English garden, with its clipped boxwood hedges and soft lawns and neat flowerbeds full of phloxes and sweet-william. It was like a breath from an old dead——

. . . Let me not think of that, let me not remember. . . .

But every year she felt herself more and more estranged from the English people she met there—especially the women. Sometimes the Resident would have friends staying with him and would give a garden party to amuse them. And the women seemed to Usha so serene and aloof and patronising.

. . . They must know of my insecurity and

anguish. They must smile at poor Shahu and scornfully pity us. Even Mrs. Hilton is always too cautiously polite, too carefully kind. She means it for the best, though. She tries to put me at my ease. It's silly to mind the little mistakes she can't help making. And oh, sometimes I do so envy her calm and settled life. . . .

She turned busily to her mirror and painted heavy streaks of kohl round her eyes, prolonging them almost to the ears. She daubed the kohl on thickly, impatiently, thrusting at her eyelids with the brass-handled brush. Then she brushed her hair sleekly back and tied it tightly low down on the nape of her neck, and round this knot she wound a neat coronet of white champak-blossom. It was cleverly woven, the close marble buds were set rigidly upon a thin gold thread. Then she took a few pale-yellow champak-flowers, more rarely perfumed than the white, with soft drooping petals, velvet to the touch, powdered with dull-gold pollen, and she set them, as it were in casual disarray, above her temples on either side of her brow.

She turned to the huge brass jars in which her dresses were folded and took out a new gold sari of Benares silk, and a bodice of green brocade. With the latter she covered her small firm breasts; and leaving the stomach bare, she

wound the sari round from her waist, between her legs, looped it over her back and down across the left shoulder so that it slanted loosely over her breasts and fell in graceful folds to her feet. She painted her toe-nails scarlet and slipped on a pair of high-heeled gilded sandals.

When she had finished dressing she went to the doorway and called out to the servant, who was sitting with Chandu in the courtyard. The child was dressed in a long coat, tight white Jodhpur breeches and tip-tilted slippers, and on his head a round red cap, gay with embroidery, hung with pearls.

"Ah, little prince, how grand you look! Put your cap at an angle—there! Now a champak-flower over the right ear. Aha, now how handsome he looks!"

The servant, standing behind the child, grinned obsequiously. She motioned him away and he slipped behind the door curtain.

She took Chandu on her knee and began to paint kohl round his eyes.

She began to tell him a story. He blinked up at her, holding the fringe of her sari with tiny gripping fists.

She told him about Saint Joan, of whom the Mother Superior used to relate such wonderful things at the Convent School, and of whom she

herself had so much loved to hear. She always imagined Joan as an Indian girl—how was it possible for her to be a European woman, cloche-hatted, tweed-skirted? No, she was an Indian peasant-girl in a coarse rust-red sari. She was standing on the outskirts of some Maratha village. Behind her crouched the thatched, mud-walled cottages, dim in the blue wood-smoke and evening mist, a dark smudge against the sky. At her feet a rock-cupped pool, inverted cone of deep-green jelly. Mild yellow Indian cows, knee-deep in amber stubble, swished lazy, brush-tipped tails. Far up in the high pale heaven an arrow of wild geese crept slowly southward, heavy russet wings moving languidly against chalk-pink clouds. Saint Michael, leaning out of Paradise, was an Aryan hero-king, peacock-plumed and muslin-kilted.

But she broke off and sighed. These tales of Europe—how little they meant to her now! Unreal dreams, rain-pearled cobwebs stirring faintly in corners of her mind. The recital of such stories brought back sad memories—mild, kind faces of the nuns at Santa Cruz, her schoolmates, old friendships and old joys—

A tale of old India. What shall I tell him? The love story of Rama and Sita, their idyll in the vast primitive forests, under ancient trees hung

with purple orchids and with convolvuluses larger than a winter moon, by jungle pools sheeted with vermillion lotuses, in the ruined courts of old forgotten kings. The tale of Queen Savitri who by her subtle wit saved her lord from the jaws of death. Of the wanderings of the Pandava clan and the slaughter of the Heroes at Kurukshetra. Of old anchorites whose merits rose in mountains, menacing heaven. Of Gautama, who cursed the Moon God with the boils that he bears on his face to this day. Of Vishvamitra, who, to mock the Creator's works, called into being those ridiculous animals, the donkey and the buffalo.

No, she would tell him of the loves of Krishna and Rukmini.

Rukmini was a princess, and when she reached the age of marriage, her father summoned all the princes of Asia to contest for the honour of her hand. She herself was to hail the winner with a garland. But a young and lovely youth appeared in the palace. Dazzled by his beauty, walking forward like one in a trance, Rukmini placed the garland round his neck, forgetful of the games and of the eager, thronging suitors. The king, her father, questioned the new-comer concerning his rank. Why, he is not even a prince! And assembled royalty laughed

to scorn this presumptuous upstart. But the stranger swung round and cried, "I shall return a greater ruler than you all," and vanished. But Rukmini fled from her father's palace and wandered in the forests, weeping bitterly. Presently an old beggar man accosted her, begging for alms. She had no money, but she stripped off her last jewels, saying, "You also are unfortunate, even as I am."

Then the beggar lifted his head. His bent, crippled form rose, towering above her, the rags fell away, the ragged beard melted into thin air. It was her lover returned to her. And she reproached him: "My lord, why did you leave me lonely and desolate so long?"

And he replied: "Though invisible to your eyes I was always at your side. I was the flowers at your feet, the enormous moss-grown trees. I was the red earth and the falling rain, the shy, sweet antelope and the tiger prowling in the electric twilight. I am the eyes that you see me with, and the mouth that yearns to mine." And as he spoke his head rose above the clouds and his eyes outshone the sun and the world was but a jewel at his feet. So Rukmini knew that her lover was the god Krishna.

Usha rocked the child on her knee, crooning the ancient story into his ear.

Suddenly she heard a clatter in the courtyard, shouts and words of command.

She heard Nana Saheb's voice calling:

"Where is His Highness? Where is the Raja Saheb?"

Her heart went cold. She had never heard Nana Saheb speak excitedly before, never even heard him raise his voice beyond a remote and courteous murmur.

She caught Chandu to her breast and ran out into the passage to a balcony that overlooked the courtyard.

Nana Saheb had dismounted from his carriage and was talking to a group of soldiers. His voice was high and shrill. She caught the words, "And no one is to leave or enter the palace without permission from me. If any soldier fails me in this . . ."

She forgot decorum, etiquette, tradition. She leant over the balcony and called:

"Nana Saheb! Nana Saheb!"

He looked up and, seeing her, bowed deeply, clasping his hands under his chin.

*"Salam, Rani Saheb."*

"What is it? What has happened?"

"Nothing, Rani Saheb. Please do not be disturbed."

"Wait there. I am coming down."

She ran down curving, tortuous passages, the child clutched in her arms, down a creaking, rickety wooden staircase, drew aside a heavy musty curtain and came out into the courtyard.

The soldiers salaamed and drew aside, watching curiously.

"Nana Saheb, I am not a child. Please tell me the whole truth."

"You must pardon me, Rani Saheb—it may all be a false alarm——"

She stamped a tiny gold-sandalled foot.

"Nana Saheb, I am Rani of Krishnagad and you are my Minister. I order you to tell me."

Nana Saheb bowed.

"Forgive me, Rani Saheb. I will tell you all." And he told her of the spy's information.

Usha listened calmly.

"Of course. It is Princess Indira. I am glad this has come at last. I have been expecting it so long."

She looked hard at the old Brahman.

"You will not fail us, Nana Saheb? In your hands is the safety of the House of Krishnagad."

The old man was deeply moved.

"My ancestors have served this kingdom from the beginning of time. I have been Minister to three princes of Krishnagad. I shall serve you to the end."



Usha turned to the soldiers and held out the child in her arms.

"You have children in your own homes. You have wives and helpless mothers: look at this child and at me, his mother. If you do not help us, we are dead. Your fathers have fought under the banner of their kings and the kings have esteemed them as their sons. You will not forsake us now?"

The soldiers were swept by a gust of wild excitement. They lifted their rifles and shouted:

"Never! Never! *Rani Saheb ki Jai!*—Victory to our Queen".

Nana Saheb stared in wide-eyed admiration at his Rani. Her head held high, her body proudly erect, she was like the old queens of history—like Ahalyabai Holkar, or the Princess of Jhansi who fell fighting the British, a bullet in her heart. It was magnificent, magnificent.

If only the Raja . . .

Usha turned to Nana Saheb.

"Please come into the palace for a moment."

He followed her without a word. She had taken command. She was the Queen and he a servant.

"What precautions have you taken, Nana Saheb?"

"I have only just heard the news, Rani Saheb. I came to warn His Highness."

She was silent for a moment, biting her lip. Then:

"Perhaps it would be better not to tell him. If everything passes off safely, he need never know. If anything happens to Princess Indira—anything unforeseen and unfortunate—the news can be broken later."

"As Your Highness pleases."

"And the procession?"

"It must be cancelled."

"Yes. You must tell the Raja that the omens are very unfavourable and the astrologers are foretelling disaster. He will be glad enough not to be bothered."

"Very well, Rani Saheb. And the garden party? I suggest that we should not interfere with that engagement."

"Why?"

"The Resident must know nothing, Rani Saheb. Otherwise, if things happen, they cannot be so easily explained away. There might be a Government enquiry, depositions, an English official appointed as Regent. . . . God knows what else. At all costs we must keep up appearances at the Residency."

"You are right, Nana Saheb. I had not thought of that. We must go to the garden party, and we must be careful that no one suspects

from our appearance or behaviour that we have cause for concern."

"And, Your Highness, someone must watch over the Raja Saheb and see that no danger comes to him."

"That will be my duty" said Usha, and looking at her firm mouth Nana Saheb felt the weight of his anxiety lighten. He salaamed and, turning, pattered softly away down the long dark corridor.

Usha returned to her room and set her child down on the couch. She stood rigid for a moment. Her heart was beating fast and she felt a strange exhilaration.

She called the servant in whose charge she was accustomed to leave Chandu (an old grey-beard Maratha who had followed her from Bombay) and told him:

"Wait in this room with Chandu. Do not leave it. I shall return presently."

She called two soldiers from the courtyard and set them on guard outside the door of her room.



Shahu lay in a gentle torpor on his bed, naked save for a loin-cloth, sweating after an enormous meal.

His masseur rubbed him slowly, pounded the arm muscles, stroked the fleshy, drooping shoulders and the soft folds of the neck, ran practised fingers over the sensitive thighs and the yielding, quivering stomach, evoking sighs of sensual contentment.

Presently Shahu opened his eyes.

"Is that musician here?"

The singing-boy had to be present in the afternoons to soothe the Raja with song, if sleep failed him. He had crept into the room, frightened after his morning's scolding, and sat crouching in one corner.

Now he coughed and said faintly:

"*Salam, Maharaj.*"

"Oh, there you are. Why don't you sing?"

"Forgive me, Maharaj. I felt sad and penitent for having troubled you this morning."

The boy laid his *sitar* on his lap and plucked at the twanging strings. His voice was thin and high but very sweet. He sang of the sacred lake of Kailas, far in the high snow-fastnesses of Himalaya, a blue-black mere, still and silent as polished stone. There are azure lotuses upon the surface. Two white swans gaze motionless at the reflection of their curving necks and golden, black-hilted beaks. And at the edge sits the Daughter of the Snows, Gauri, the dark god-

dess. She sings to herself as she braids a garland for her lord, who towers above her like an eternal hill, Shiva, wrapt in meditation, ash-smeared and tiger-robed, with the Ganges in his yellow hair.

"Ah, ah," sighed Shahu, "that I too might be at peace, a hermit in some lonely place."

The tears streamed down his cheeks.

Ah, to escape from the endless boredom of existence, the incessantly recurrent wheel of lives, revolving till the very self be purged away—the torturing Maya of illusion—fears, hopes and desires, whose pursuit is a weariness of the flesh and whose satisfaction is but the dust and ashes of disappointment. To be an anchorite at Haradwar, in the cleft of the great hills, where Mother Ganges comes with gongs and trumpets out upon the Indian plain, where a myriad hermits doze beside the holy water and the bells of worship toll from dawn to dusk. Or at Benares, where the mists of morning sacrifice coil above the tawny stream, and the many-storied Ghats are embossed with the red umbrellas of innumerable saints. Or at Brindaban, where the chants of thronging worshippers echo through the endless colonnades of the rose-red shrine of Krishna, overshadowed by a palm-tree carved of solid gold. Ah, for the cool silence of stone cloisters and the perfumed dark-

ness of old temples—the gleam of yellow lights on the silver masks of the gods, calm, unmoved, a faint smile curving below thin nostrils, eyes dark, turned down and inward, absorbed by the one reality, the illusion of all existence. Bowed, shaven heads of naked priests. The wail of ceremonial flutes. Rasp and dry glitter of stiff brocades. Swish of silken curtains as the palanquin of God goes by.

The masseur leaned forward and stroked Shahu's flabby chest, softly brushing the nipples with velvet finger-tips.

He began to speak about some new girl, lately arrived in Krishnagad from Lahore.

"A treasure, my lord. Her teeth are pearls. Her lips are red as a divided pomegranate. Her hips are round and soft like two twin water-melons. Her face is oval as a fresh young pipal leaf. Her nose is curved like that of a parrot. Her neck is a marble tower."

Shahu nodded and sighed. With a wave of his hand he dismissed the singing-boy.

How quickly faded the visions of ascetic retreat! It was useless. His flesh always quickened at the mention of women. Women and opium, food and sleep—since all is illusion, these four—these at least bring momentary oblivion of the nightmare of existence.

"Yes," he sighed. "She had better be brought to the palace."

"If Maharaj would deign to listen to my suggestion——"

But he was interrupted.

The door curtain swung aside, and a servant announced:

"The Rani Saheb!"

Usha came into the room very self-possessed.

Shahu raised his head. Seeing her, he pulled the counterpane across his middle and sat up. He was still drowsy and confused. . . . Why has she come in like this? She has never before come to my room except at my request.

Is there something wrong? . . .

"You have not forgotten," Usha asked, "that the garden party is at five? Chandu and I are ready. Chandu has his new cap on and it suits him wonderfully."

The masseur stood beside the bed, his eyes smouldering. He had been promised a rich reward if he could persuade the Raja to come to a rendezvous at a house in the city in search of the new Lahore dancing-girl.

He did not bow to Usha nor salaam.

She turned to him.

"You can go now. The Raja Saheb will be dressing and will not need you."

He stood motionless, glowering.

She came up close to him and began to speak very quietly.

"You know that one of the royal elephants has gone mad? It is confined in the stone stable. You would not care perhaps to be locked into that stable too?"

The man's jaw dropped, his face went sickly yellow, his nose wrinkled with terror. He ran from the room.

A sudden fierce joy caught Usha by the throat. An overmastering desire to strike the masseur as he turned and ran. To strike his face—aha!—let her nails sink in, deep into that puffy, swollen face—to pull his hair and crush his nose with the heel of her gold sandal.

She stood rigid, breathing heavily, her fists clenched at her side.

The mood passed. She turned and said:

"May I help you to dress, dear Shahu?"

He began grumbling.

"I haven't had my dose of opium. You know I can't go anywhere without my opium. I must have it."

She went to the door, drew aside the curtain. The masseur was whispering with a group of servants. When he saw Usha, the pupils of his eyes contracted; his eyes seemed all white in



the gloom. He salaamed obsequiously, watching her nervously.

"Is the Raja Saheb's opium ready?"

"Yes, Rani Saheb," he gabbled. "Quite ready. Here it is—in a cup—all ready for Raja Saheb."

"Then bring it quickly."

The masseur sidled into the room, his back grazing along the wall, his eyes fixed on Usha's face. He carried on a brass tray a little *kusumba* cup. Shahu took the cup and drank off the liquid opium.

The masseur watched him with glazed eyes. He had as usual mixed with the opium a pinch of the drug *datura* that he was supplied with at regular intervals—the slow, slow poison that had for years been corroding Shahu's mind and brain.

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EVENING

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PART III  
*EVENING*

THE vehement heat of the day was passing. On the colourless, opaque dust stirred the first faint blue shadows. A soft breeze, cool and fragrant, steady and caressing (a merciful deliverance from the hot, jumpy gusts that troubled the distended noon), rustled over the pipal-trees; their shimmering blue-green leaves rippled like wet pebbles.

The swimming haze began to break up, folded into smoky spirals and was gone. Square, flat-roofed houses were neat and bright as children's bricks. Beyond the city walls the leagues of ripening maize stood golden in the sun, rank upon rank of glistening corn, erect and splendid as Spanish infantry.

And far, against the sky, Mount Wandan, whereon was the citadel of the old kings—the hill that at noon was a toppling mass of snowy masonry, ribbed with palest green—a vast and menacing cloud driven on in the path of the monsoon—was now a pale ethereal sail, a billowing wave of honeysuckle colour, flecked with deep violet shadows athwart its foam-pale

flanks; and on its summit loomed the ruin of an ancient temple of the Goddess Kali. People said it was haunted. For in the Mutiny the Maharani Regent of Krishnagad had murdered the English Resident, and declared herself independent. She had then revived the old sadistic rites of the Goddess of Destruction. Her troopers roamed far and wide, carrying off little children and young girls for the ceremonies. And the Regent herself drew the long sacrificial knife and slit the tight-drawn, quivering throat from ear to ear. The head swung limply back and the blood gushed out at the goddess' feet, blood and a tangle of torn flesh.

So in the villages mothers still whispered to their children, "Don't go out at night—or the Maharani-Devi will catch you, will catch you," or "If you are naughty, I shall shut you outside the house and at midnight the Maharani-Devi will come riding by, and will carry you off in a thick, black bag."

In the bazaar a profound torpor had succeeded the febrile trafficking of the noon market. Even the policeman stationed at the cross-roads had retired into the shadow of a vegetable shop and slumbered heavily, his head resting on a pillow of cabbages. But now as the sunlight

declined and the fresher breeze of evening blew down the street he awoke, yawned, blew his nose on the fringe of his turban, coughed, cursed and stretched cramped limbs. He trundled an empty whisky-case to the middle of the cross-roads, spread a red umbrella, and sat there blinking and rubbing bloodshot eyes.

An obsequious hotel-keeper hurried across the road with a cup of hot tea, salaamed, grinned, carefully proffered his offering with both hands as though it were a gift of incalculable value. The policeman nodded, adding gruffly:

“And some cigarettes?”

Shopkeepers sprinkle rose-water in the dust before their houses. Slops are emptied from windows. Urine and human excrement trickle thinly from under wooden doorways. Piles of paper and rotting straw and stinking linen and fly-spotted faeces clutter every angle of the streets. Pink-manged mongrels nuzzle and roll and lift boil-scarred hind-legs above these reeking dumps. Green slime and trickling filth rope verminous clay walls.

In the houses women begin their preparation for the evening meal. Dry branches crackle in cavernous ovens; green twigs hiss, brown-bubbling, oozing gummy sap. Rose-water is

sprinkled over stone-flagged courtyards, wet linen hung to dry. The acrid haze of burning cow-dung mingles with the heavy perfume of synthetic roses. Window shutters clatter open; and the breeze billows pink curtains, bellying them round and back into frowsy rooms smelling of old meals.

The liquor shops are open. Tired, sweating men cluster round the stone counter whence the hierophant dispenses diluted nectar. The pungent country liquor, colourless and bitter, bubbles from green-labelled bottles. Beer drums into tin mugs, fatly gushes, slops dully, slops awash. Iron tables are puddly with rancid spilth, the sawdusted floor beaded with brown drops.

Weary men drink, sigh happily, lean back against the crumbling wall.

It has been very hot to-day. Hot as though with thunder; but there is no thunder. There is a feeling of uneasy suspense, a fear and menace in the air.

Warily they turn to each other.

"Have you heard anything, brother?"

"Of what? Of what?"

Startled glances right and left under heavy turbans.

"They say . . ."

"Is the Raja ill? . . . Will there be a change . . . a change?"

"They say . . . Hush!"

A heavy footfall. But it is not a policeman or a soldier. Only the old road-mender coming in for lethean relief.

"You were saying? . . ."

"Yes, I heard that too. They were whispering that in the temple. First I heard two priests behind a column. A change. . . . The old woman, they were saying . . ."

"The old woman? Ah! . . ."

"And the young Rani Saheb?"

"No. The priests have never liked her. Her family were unbelievers. She may be a sincere Hindu, but she has made no gifts to the temples, shows no honour to the priests. . . ."

"Ha! The priests are very powerful. They know so much, so much."

One young workman sat by himself. He felt unhappy. These vague whispers and threats disturbed him. The young Rani Saheb was so beautiful. Any man would like a woman like that, fair and tender and slim.

Suddenly they heard a blare of trumpets and the clip-clop of horse-hoofs on cobbles.

"The Raja Saheb! . . ."



They tumbled out of the dark shop and stood blinking in the sun.

"And the Rani. They are going to the Resident Saheb's house."

They came past in an open carriage, red umbrellas nodding over them.

The men salaamed. Shahu raised a fat hand dully. Usha replied with the *namaskar* salute, hands clasped beneath her chin.

"And the child. That is our Yuvraj."

The young workman felt sad. That young sweet boy—what would happen to him? If there was a change . . .

Should he cry out now, cry out a warning? It would be easy. He would rise and cry, "Maharaj! O Maharaj!"—just like that. The carriage would stop and he would warn them, tell them of the whispers in the bazaar.

But they mightn't believe him. He might be beaten, have his turban knocked off, be dishonoured in front of everyone. The heart of a prince is dark. What did the old proverb say? "Inscrutable is the mind of a king. He will cut off your head for a salaam, and for a curse he will clothe you with robes of honour." Better remain silent. It is all in the hands of Fate and I cannot alter her decrees. Nothing matters, nothing. We have so many lives to

live—what does it matter what happens in one life?

In the next carriage came Nana Saheb. Now the young workman felt glad he had remained quiet. He hated the proud old Brahman. So cold and aloof—looking past you with pale, cruel eyes. A great landowner, and very stern with his peasants, exact, meticulous, unforgiving, unmerciful. In the old days when the Brahmans were supreme, they had denied all education to the lower castes. If an Untouchable presumed to listen to the sacred Scriptures his ears would be filled with boiling lead; if he uttered them, his mouth.

The young workman spat. That speaker the other night had been telling them about Russia. . . .

When the cortège had passed, the men returned to the dark, cool cave of the liquor shop.

More country liquor, please. An anna's worth of beer. It was hot out there in the road. Thank you, thank you—

"That was the young Yuvraj, was it? He looks small and delicate, doesn't he?"

"Perhaps he is ill. It is a bad season of the year. Many people are ill in the city."

"In our village, too. Three men died of small-pox yesterday. We built an image of the Small-

pox Goddess out of clay—washed it with honey and milk—garlanded it with flowers and offered rice and treacle. But more men were taken with the disease this morning.”

“My little son has been ailing for many weeks. He is very thin, wasting away. We do not know how to cure him. My wife sold her two bracelets and the anklet that was her mother’s and we gave them to the priest. He gave us a red string, full of magic, to tie on the child’s wrist. But he gets no better.”

“—Did you hear that people had seen smoke rising from the ruined Kali Temple on Wandan Hill? That’s a sure sign of coming evil——”

“—And if he doesn’t get well, what are we to do? I have no other son.”

“I heard of one man who saved his little son by sacrificing his daughter to Vithal.” Vithal, the Ghost King, whose circle of white stones stands at the entry of every village. You hear his hoof-beats on a still night. “The *patel* found out, but he gave him his only cow as a bribe and no report was made.”

“And the man’s son got well. . . .”

“Ah? . . .”

The liquor shop was crowded now, the air heavy and dank. Bare feet padded in the beer-flecked sawdust. Glasses clinked, mugs rang on

the iron tables. The shopkeeper leant against his stone counter, with quick fingers slipping the coins into a wooden box. He smiled and nodded at his clients.

Behind him the wall was gay with coloured prints. Krishna danced with the *gopi* girls on a bare yellow hill. The Monkey God snarled, red mouth agape, four arms rising in a halo round his head. The divine king Rama was enthroned in majesty, his meek, devoted queen beside him, rescued by the Aryan armies from the demon kingdom of Ceylon.



"I hate these garden parties."

Mrs. Hilton was powdering her face before the cheval-glass.

Phyllis sat on the bed, swinging her legs.

"But they ought to be so interesting, Auntie. All the different types of Indian . . ."

"My dear, they're all painfully alike."

"Really? But, after all——"

"I know, dearest. I felt like you when I first came to India. Longed to get to know them. Thought there must be a fascinating world to explore. You'd only got to get behind the rather dreary façade and then . . . . . Oh, dear! One

only admits the truth after endless disappointments. One blames oneself. Was I very *gauche*? Did I make some hideous *gaffe*? I seemed to be getting on so well, and then suddenly that blank wall. It was only after years that I found out that the blank wall is the end, there is nothing else beyond. I tried to be interested in the women, to feel sorry for them and encourage their interests in outside things. I thought they were badly treated, despised, constrained. But they're not, really. They're free and happy—and oh, my dear, so dull. The dullest, dullest people. I don't think they ever do or think anything interesting."

"Auntie, darling, I'm sure you're wrong. . . . That awful, thrilling palace. It gives me a conviction of intrigue and prison and sudden death."

"Rubbish. It's a horrid pile of Ruskin Gothic. And inside they do nothing at all all day except eat too much, sleep too much, and have too many children."

"Do you know the language well?"

"Well enough to talk to the servants. Do be an angel and help me find my brooch. That emerald one I wore at lunch. There it is. False alarm, sorry. Don't you think it goes rather nicely with this black lace dress?"

"Divine, darling."

"But do *look*. . . ."

"Yes, Auntie, I am looking. I think it's lovely. I suppose my dress is all right, isn't it? White. Simple and virginal."

She spun round on her toes.

"Yes, dear. Picture of fresh young English womanhood, I suppose? Very successful. I like the red belt and red shoes."

"I couldn't resist those. Uncle said I must dress simply. It didn't do to look fast in front of Indians. Auntie, I feel so thirsty. Can I have a teeny drink?"

"Well, for goodness' sake have it now and not when the Indians arrive."

"Why ever?"

"I don't think it's quite the thing for them to see an Englishwoman smoke and drink. Sounds too eighteen-eighty, doesn't it? Oh, it's all right in Bombay—their own women do it there. But here it's rather different. The Indians are backward and it gives them wrong ideas. At least, your uncle thinks so."

"Well, can I have a gimlet now?"

"M'm, rather. I'll keep you company. Boy! Two gimlets. Hurry up, you fathead."

"Why don't you speak to him in Hindustani?"

"You see, the only words of Hindustani I really know are dreadful words of abuse. I have to save those up. After all, they're all you need, really. . . . And besides, I don't know the Hindustani for gimlet."

When the servant brought the drinks he announced that some guests had come.

"Who? Didn't you bring their cards?"

"Have brought them for Madam Saheb. Here on tray."

"Oh yes. Dadabhoy? That old Parsi. And daughter. How quaint. He's written in blue pencil 'and daughter' under his name. Isn't that touching!"

"I think that's too sweet. Can I keep that card?"

"Do, my dear. D'you mind if we go along, now? Gulp down your drink."

They went into the drawing-room. A vast oblong hall. A few water-colours of English scenes—hollyhocks round pretty cottages, washy bluebells in woodland glades. Bamboo chairs covered with cheery cretonnes. Green Axminster carpets stretched over thick straw matting that crackled under your feet. A grand piano that had never been played on but was very useful for displaying silver-framed photos. Dorothy's two little boys in the white cricket

flannels and blazers of their preparatory school. A signed photo of the Governor in official robes, and one of George Hilton in his uniform. A single low bookshelf with tattered florin novels. On the round blackwood table in the centre of the room a fern in a brass pot and month-old numbers of the *Tatler*, *Bystander* and *Sketch*.

They found Mr. Dadabhoy bolt upright on the edge of a hard cane chair. His daughter, fashionable in a sari of English *crêpe de Chine*, sat with an assumed worldliness on the sofa.

"How do you do, Mr. Dadabhoy? And this is your daughter is it? I don't think we've met before, have we? No. I'm so glad to meet you. May I introduce my niece? Mr. Dadabhoy, Miss Dadabhoy. Do either of you smoke?"

Miss Dadabhoy timidly selected a cigarette. A hovering servant lit it for her and she puffed unconvincingly. Mrs. Hilton put on her most motherly air and sat by her on the sofa.

Mr. Dadabhoy turned a beaming, puckish face on Phyllis.

"You have not been long in India, no doubt?"

"No. Just come out. Spent a week in Bombay and came straight here."

"M'm. M'm. Did you like Bombay?"

"It's a wonderful place, isn't it? Except for the awful buildings. . . ."



"No doubt, no doubt. Of course my family all live there. All my family. Nearly all our race lives there."

"You're a Parsi?"

"Oh yes. Yes."

"That's really the same as the old religion of Mithras, isn't it?"

"Mithras is one of the Angels."

"My ancestors—the ancestors of nearly all English people—must have been Mithraists when Diocletian was Emperor. So that is a bond between us."

She sat forward, earnest, excited. The fair Phrygian youth glimmering in the darkness of dripping caves. Stench and horror of the stricken Bull. Red torches gleaming on the armour of kneeling legionaries.

Mr. Dadabhoy did not answer, did not understand.

"When we were at the Yacht Club—you know the Yacht Club in Bombay?"

"Very well. From the outside. Indians are not allowed inside the gates."

"Oh? I didn't know. . . . Well, anyway, I used to see the Parsis praying by the seashore and throwing flowers into the sea. Why do they do that?"

"They pray to Anahita, Angel of Water."

Anahita? Anahita, Queen of Ecbatana. Enormous vaults with rank on rank of winged bulls and bearded kings. Silence and dust of centuries. Syrian Antiochus cries and falls at the feet of the goddess, his yellow hair blood-stained, the frantic tribesmen pouring over his prostrate form. Anahita—Anaitis, Lady of the Lake.

“Anahita! Are you sure? Do people worship Anahita even now?”

. . . She is laughing at one. Like all these English people. Afterwards she will laugh over my answers with her friends. What a funny old chap, they will say. Ho, ho, ho! aren’t Indians a joke? No. No, that will do.

“I do not know, miss. I don’t know about these things.”

“But—but you must do. Why, only a moment ago you told me so very definitely, you said that——”

But Mr. Dadabhoy gave a hysterical little giggle that disconcerted her and reduced her to silence.

Mrs. Hilton looked round.

. . . Why don’t the other guests come?

She turned back to Miss Dadabhoy.

“Do you sing, Miss Dadabhoy?”

“Oh no. Not *at all*.”

"She does," contradicted her father. "She sings very well. She sings in the best way."

"Father!" she pouted, "I can only sing Indian music. You will never let me learn English-style music."

"But I'm very fond of Indian music." Mrs. Hilton spread her most social smile. She almost wheedled, "Won't you sing us a song? Do!"

Miss Dadabhoy wriggled with embarrassment.

Her father thought for a moment and then said sternly: "Sing that couplet of Hafiz you learnt the other day."

And turning to Phyllis he held up a long finger: "Please listen, miss. This is a best Persian song."

Miss Dadabhoy began humming far back in her throat. Her voice was high and shrill but not unpleasant. She opened her mouth and sang shrilly, nasally. It sounded as if she were making up the time as she went along. She seemed to be repeating the same words over and over again. She finished with a sudden gulp and began to giggle.

"I think that was beautiful," said Phyllis. "Now, do tell me what the words were."

"It is a love-poem," said Mr. Dadabhoy.

"Hafiz sings like this: For the little mole on my lady's cheek I would give away the cities of Bukhara and Samarcand."

"Bukhara and Samarcand! Aren't those simply thrilling names!"

"Yes, miss. In those days Tamerlane was Emperor. He was angry about this song. He sent for Hafiz. He shouted out: 'Hey! wretched poet. I, who am Emperor of Asia, have spent my whole life battling for those two great cities, and you, who are but a beggar, propose to give them away in exchange for the mole on some woman's cheek! Now what does this mean?' So Hafiz said: 'My lord, it is true that I am but dust and that you are the shadow of God on earth. But it is owing to such misplaced extravagance on my part that I have become the wretched beggar you see before you to-day.' And Tamerlane was pleased with his wit. He laughed and gave him a purse of gold."

Phyllis nodded, smiling. A great bearded man upon a gold throne. Tartar standards of yak's-tail plumes are white goose feathers in a green sky. Foaming cherry-blossom and blue tiles. Wine-red carpets from Shiraz spread in a flowery meadow. In one corner of a carpet a tiny jewelled manuscript, a jar of sherbet and an onyx-studded lute.

"That's a charming story, I think. Do you know any others like it?"

"No miss."

. . . I should not have told her that story. She is laughing to herself over it. I must be more careful.

A moment of uneasy silence was terminated by the entry of the Resident, very spruce in silver-grey flannels.

"Ah! Mr. Dadabhoy! How are you? How are you? Looking fit as usual I'm glad to see. And so this is Miss Dadabhoy is it? Well, well. Yes, splendid, splendid."

Presently the other guests began to arrive.

When the Raja and Rani were announced, the Resident went out to meet them on the verandah.

"Ha, Raja Saheb, how are you?"

"Good afternoon Major, good afternoon."

"Would you care to come into the drawing-room, or shall we sit in the garden? What d'you say? Personally, I vote for the garden. It's cooler now out of doors."

Basket chairs were set round small bamboo tables on the lawn. A servant stood motionless by each table. At the far end of the lawn was a long buffet.

"What d'you say to the garden, Rani Saheb?"

Those in favour signify in the usual manner—ha, ha. Yes. I'll just call my wife. I don't think she knows you're here. Dorothy! I say, we're all going out in the garden."

"Very well dear. Let's all go in the garden, shall we? Are you agreeable to that, Mr. Dada-bhoy? Yes, I think so. It's cooler out of doors now. The evenings are better now, aren't they? Soon we shall have quite a nip in the air. How one longs for the cold weather in India!"

She came slowly down the steps of the verandah, the guests following her.

"Ah, Nana Saheb!" Hilton shook hands with the old Brahman. "Come along. Sit down, won't you? Well, I suppose you won't have a cup of tea?"

"Excuse me sir, excuse me."

"Oh *do*," urged Phyllis.

"I'm afraid he can't have tea with us. Against his religion. He thinks we're all savages, don't you old man?"

Nana Saheb looked shocked beyond measure.

"Oh no sir. Not savages."

"Well, if you drank some of our tea you'd have to undergo all sorts of penances and purifications, wouldn't you?"

"Sir, these are old-fashioned notions, no doubt. But we are brought up in them. We find

it impossible to shake them off. Our sons, perhaps, will be different."

Phyllis wrinkled her forehead in bewilderment.

"Why, what's the idea? What's wrong with tea?"

Mr. Dadabhoy began to explain.

. . . Let her laugh now at the Brahman. It would be very good for the haughty old creature.

"You see miss, all we people—that is, all Europeans, Parsis, Muslims—we all eat meat, especially beef. Beef——"

A spasm of acute distress twisted Nana Saheb's face. Even mention of the flesh of the cow hurt him. . . . Holy Mother Cow, with her soft sleek coat and trustful brown eyes, the very incarnation of mild contentment and selfless service, on whose milk we are nourished from birth to death, whose very urine and excrement are sweet and purifying,—oh, that gentle, holy creature is daily martyred to make food for these barbarians. Why must they be always killing, killing? All Nature cowers sadly back from their reeking blades and smoking guns. The Creator will repay—yes, He will be revenged on them for their reign of massacre and fear.

"Beef," repeated Mr. Dadabhoy, noting with

gloating satisfaction how Nana Saheb winced at the word, "beef and mutton and pork—but especially beef. We all eat it, which is very natural. But these Brahmans will not touch animal food, and anyone who does they regard as unclean."

Nana Saheb raised a protesting hand.

"Not *unclean*. . . ."

The Resident judged it time to change the conversation.

"And what time is the procession Nana Saheb? After dark, I suppose?"

"I am sorry, sir, to tell you that there will be no procession."

"No procession! Why, why ever not?"

"Sir, there were too many objections. This was not right and that was not right. The omens were very bad. The astrologers said that a very evil conjunction of stars made it unwise. Everything was wrong"—he moved his hands about and wagged his head—"and so, after much consultation, we decided not to have a procession."

The Raja turned heavy eyes on to Nana Saheb.

"No procession, Nana Saheb?"

Usha leant across.

"You remember you suggested there shouldn't be one," she said sharply.



"Did I?"

He put his hand to his forehead. Had he? He found it so difficult to remember, difficult to concentrate. Procession? Why was there to be no procession? It was good, though, very good. He could go back and sleep. The opium didn't seem to be working as well as usual to-day. He hardly felt at all revived. Or was it that the day had been so hot? . . . That new girl his masseur had been talking about. . . . What happened about her? Was she coming to the palace? He couldn't remember.

The datura clogged his brain like a miasma.

"I do think your little boy is sweet." Mrs. Hilton patted Chandu on the head. "He looks simply charming in his new smart clothes. Quite the little prince. I wish I had my camera. I'd like to take a snapshot of him. You wouldn't mind, would you?"

"It's very kind of you to suggest it," Usha said with composure.

Chandu looked up timidly at the strange white lady with the loud voice.

The Assistant Resident came up to the table.

"Oh Mr. Somervell," Mrs. Hilton besought him, "do be an angel and get my kodak—it's a

V.P.K., you know—just on the dressing-table in my room.”

The Resident called out, “Hullo padre! there’s a seat over here.”

“Ah, thank you Major. Hot, isn’t it? And I came on my bike. That’s hot work if you like, cycling in this climate. Ah, but what a lovely garden yours is! I admire it afresh every time I see it.”

“Yes, not bad. Dorothy does it all you know—looks after it herself, you know. Can’t trust the gardeners. They’d like to spend the day sleeping under a tree.”

“Those hollyhocks are a real picture, a treat to the eyes.”

“Very beautiful indeed,” Nana Saheb nodded gravely.

A servant brought a card on a brass salver. The Resident adjusted his eyeglass and read aloud: “The Reverend N. L. Kelkar. Oh, that’s the R.C. chap. Here, padre, you’ll have to talk to him.”

. . . Don’t like R.C.’s at the best of times—as for Indian R.C.’s . . .

Mr. Kelkar sat down in the chair the Resident had been occupying.

He was a Brahman, a caste-fellow of Nana

Saheb's. He had been one of the most brilliant men of his generation, a scholar deeply versed in the abstruse lore of the *Vedanta*, hailed in the centres of Hinduism with the honorific titles of Pandit and Mahamahopadhyaya, an ascetic remarkable for his enormous austerities and almost legendary penances, a worker of miracles, a wit and a dialectician. One day when he was travelling to Benares to attend a reception held in his honour, a curious thing happened. Christ came into his railway compartment. They were alone, the two of them, the haughty young intellectual and the calm-eyed Son of God. He knew that it was Christ with that sense with which in dreams one identifies one's friends—no physical recognition, but the certainty of instinct, conveyed without question and insusceptible to doubt. A beardless, yellow-haired Hellenic youth, wearing the coarse blanket of the Hindu friar, but having in his still regard the authority of the Pantokrator. They sat in silence, the Brahman rigid and afraid. At the next station Christ left the railway carriage. On his knee the Brahman found a New Testament lying open. He had still two days of journeying before he would reach Benares, and he read the book from cover to cover. On the station at Benares priests were awaiting him with banners

and garlands and drums. He stood at the door of his carriage. He drew aside the yellow mantle that he wore about his shoulders and he tore the Sacred Thread from his neck with a wild shout, "I have become a Christian."

He had become a Catholic priest and had opened a small mission-school at Krishnagad. His recent book, *St. Thomas and the Vedanta*, published simultaneously in Sanskrit and English, was an attempt to reconcile the teachings of the *Summa* with Shankara's philosophy, and had evoked widespread interest. It was, however, perplexing the authorities of his Church, who distrusted the almost perverse subtlety that marred the book's enormous scholarship and erudition.

Father Kelkar made the *namaskar* salutation to Nana Saheb, who returned it. He then smiled faintly at the Anglican chaplain.

The chaplain's smile was even fainter. He was in a bad temper. On his return to his house he had found awaiting him a long querulous letter from an Anglo-Indian lady who had taken one of his converts into her service. "You promised me he was honest," she grumbled, "and now he's run off with four of my spoons out of my best dinner set." If only people would realise it was not a missionary's job to find them

servants. The woman had wanted a docile servant on low wages, and had chosen a convert because he would probably be destitute and therefore servile.

And now this Kelkar fellow whom he deeply distrusted. Just like a Brahman to become a Roman. Keep the same sense of power and superiority over your fellow-men. Thinks it's one up on me, I suppose. You bet he gloats over Leo XIII's absurd Bull.

"Well, Father Kelkar," he said coldly, "how are things with you? How many children have you got in your school?"

"Four."

"Ah, only four?"

"Yes. Four Brahman boys."

"H'm. We, of course, concentrate rather on the lower castes. We find them more—ah—responsive."

"Possibly. But the Brahmans are the natural leaders of our race. Where they lead, the other castes will follow."

They spoke to each other across a vast gulf of misunderstanding.

Nana Saheb smiled at Father Kelkar. Pale Brahman eyes looked deep into pale Brahman eyes. You worship Christ and I Krishna. They are one and the same. The peace of love's

suffering and the peace of love's satiety. A pale youth writhing on a tree; a dark youth dancing in the gardens of paradise. We know and understand each other's inner soul. But we have no conception of the mentality of this barbarian.

Phyllis made a determined assault on Usha. Surely she must be clever and intelligent, in spite of being a Hindu. After all, she was educated at a convent and speaks perfect English. Surely I can establish some relations with her—get something out of her beyond the ordinary gossip and social chatter?

“So this is your little son, Rani Saheb?”

“Yes.”

“Getting quite a big boy, isn't he? Will you be sending him to school?”

“No. We shall have tutors at the palace for him.”

“I think that's so sad and lonely for a little boy, not to have playmates of his own age. It makes his lessons so much more interesting if he has other boys to compete with. And what about games?”

“We may get an English tutor to teach him cricket. He will learn to ride naturally enough, for his race and family are great horsemen.”

“But why not send him to school?”

"He will learn with his tutors all the things necessary for his position."

. . . For he will be a prince, a prince. The blood throbbed behind her forehead. Her twining fingers dug sharp nails into the flesh of her palms. That is all I want. Oh, God, God—that is all that I desire—to see my son a prince. . . . Yes, but what is happening there in the city? Which of the troops are faithful?—which disloyal? What is that lean old woman plotting in the shadows of her house? I mustn't think of that. I must be calm. I mustn't let them see my anxiety. A Maratha princess, a Maratha princess—I will not fail my rank and race.

"He's a very quiet little boy, isn't he?"

"Is he? Oh yes, perhaps he is tired. Are you tired, Chandu my pet?"

The child, overcome by a sudden fit of shyness, turned and hid his face in his mother's lap.

"Oh how sweet! He's shy, the dear wee lamb."

"Not shy. Tired."

"Of course, it's been a hot day, hasn't it? Thunder in the air."

"Yes. Thunder. That was it. . . . Thunder."

"And I always think there's nothing so tiring as thunder."

"No. It is very tiring."

"I thought *you* were looking a little tired. Do you know that I find a most excellent tonic——"

"I'm not tired, not *really* tired." And Usha sat up very straight, arranging her shawl and trying to smile brightly. They mustn't see, mustn't guess.

Phyllis sighed. I don't seem able to make any progress. Perhaps Aunt Dorothy is right, and they are all just dull. The Rani seems at first quite sensible and European, but I suppose it's all on the surface. I suppose she doesn't really think at all. Just a parrot-chatter of English.

Usha turned fever-bright eyes restlessly to and fro. Why can't the English girl leave me alone? She sits there staring at me as if I were an animal. But I mustn't think. I mustn't show anything.

She made a tremendous effort and turned a gaily smiling face:

"It has been so nice having such an interesting conversation!"

Somervell tapped the edge of Phyllis' chair and asked:

"How about a knockabout on the tennis-court?"

"Oh, rather. I'll run in and get my racket. Excuse me, won't you, Rani Saheb?"

Usha bowed, sighing with relief.



Mrs. Hilton watched Phyllis and Somervell walking together towards the tennis-court. Somervell almost put his hand on Phyllis' arm as he opened for her the little wooden gate that led to the court.

Mrs. Hilton was sitting beside Mr. Dadabhoy. Usually she liked talking to the courteous old man. But to-day his fluent stream of murmured platitudes got on her nerves.

"Yes, yes," she nodded, giving him a busy smile.

Somervell and Phyllis played a languid set. Then they sat down and talked. He brought her a lemonade.

"I suppose you like India?" Phyllis asked him.

"Yes, rather. A young man's country you know."

It was the accepted phrase. Everyone repeated it. So it must be true.

"But being here has made all the difference. Your aunt has been wonderful to me. I think she's simply marvellous. She asked me to stay as long as I wanted when I first came here. It was like coming home. You see, I'd been on the Frontier for three years."

Yes, to see roses in silver bowls on polished tables. . . . In Waziristan he had shared a crumbling barrack with three other men. They

slept on camp-beds and there was no other furniture save the hooks in the walls whence depended their clothes. . . . Endless hours of stifling noon; and the interminable nights, when the pariah dogs howled under a livid moon and the mosquitoes droned about your face—it was too hot to bear even a mosquito-curtain. . . . White walls and barbed wire and jagged, ochre hills.

And then to come to this soft South country with its yellow downs and damp warm winds.

. . . And Mrs. Hilton had been so charming. Awfully attractive she looked. Especially at night in those long black lace dresses. She'd been more like a pal to him—instead of the wife of his Chief.

“I say, Phyllis. What d’you say to a picnic to-morrow out at Khadawasla Lake? I’ve got an M.G. sports model. Topping little bus. Simply shifts, I can tell you. We’d get over there in no time.”

“I think that’s a heavenly idea.”

Mrs. Hilton excused herself to Mr. Dadabhoy and escaped.

I must see that bed of flowers over there. It’s looking rather ragged, I’ve only just noticed. The zinnias are all over and they looked so bedraggled. I must have them up to-morrow

and some cannas put in. Oh, those two have stopped playing tennis have they? There they are, sitting together on a bench under the goldmohur-tree.

She caught the words, "Ought we to ask Mrs. Hilton to come?"

"I don't think so. It wouldn't amuse Aunt Dorothy very much. She tires rather quickly, you know."

Tires rather quickly. . . . An old woman. . . . I suppose I do tire quickly. It's the climate of this horrible place. Oh, I feel half dead always. If Phyllis only knew what an effort it is to laugh and be jolly with her! How cruel the young can be!

She pushed open the wooden gate with a clatter.

"Oh, here you are. Why Phyllis, you've quite deserted me. I hoped you'd help me entertain our guests."

"I *am* sorry, Aunt Dorothy. I'll come at once."

Mrs. Hilton's eyes wandered and came to rest on Somervell's face. He looked red and sheepish. She felt a sudden anger. The clumsy puppy!

"And Mr. Somervell, I don't think my husband is particularly pleased with you. Why aren't you helping him? He was asking for you

a moment ago and no one knew where you were."

He looked frightened and unhappy. Her heart sank. Why did I say that? It's broken everything. It's the first time I've ever played the heavy mem-saheb.

She turned back into the garden.

"Well, Nana Saheb old chap, isn't there *anything* I can order for you? Some milk. What d'you say to a glass of milk?"

"Saheb, you are too kind. Perhaps a few nuts."

"Nuts. Right-ho. Here, butler, bring some nuts for Nana Saheb."

A few shelled ground-nuts were brought on a saucer. Nana Saheb pecked at them like a bird. After all, nuts could not count as food, food taken in the presence of outcastes and barbarians. The Resident watched him patronisingly. What a shrivelled little stick the old man was! But sharp as a pin. Oh, no mistaking his brains.

"Not looking as well as usual, Nana Saheb."

"Perhaps I am a little tired, Saheb. I have simply too much work."

"Tired? Yes, you look tired you know. Take a rest. Why not hop off to the hills for a fortnight?"

"You are too good, Saheb. I will think over it."

The nuts were hard and tasteless. His throat was dry. For a second he saw his hands tremble. That was bad; wouldn't do at all. Mustn't let the Resident see his hands shake like that. He put the nuts down and laid his hands on his knees, gripping the knee-caps.

"Any news in the city?"

"No Saheb, everything is quite quiet."

But what *was* happening there? He had told his spy Himatrao to bring him word of how the guards at the city gates had received his orders.

Why doesn't the creature come . . . come . . . come?

"That's good. Things seem quiet everywhere nowadays. Nothing much in to-day's paper."

"No, there was no news Saheb."

Ah! There was Himatrao, beckoning to him from the bushes.

"Will you excuse me a moment, Saheb? There is one of my servants who wishes to speak to me."

"Certainly, certainly. Nothing serious I trust?"

"No, no, thank you Saheb. Just one of my small boys is not well and I left word to fetch a doctor. The servant was to let me know what the doctor said."

"Dear me. I'm sorry to hear that, very sorry indeed. But I don't expect it's much. It's been a horrid day to-day. Thunder in the air. We've all been feeling it."

Nana Saheb slipped across the lawn.

"Himatrao. What news?"

"They all took the orders well, Nana Saheb. All except the captain in charge of Guardroom Number Six. I followed your messenger with the official despatch. I watched carefully how the officers read your orders. All the others read them with surprise but with no other emotion, and gave orders to their soldiers exactly as you directed in your despatch. But the captain in charge of Guardroom Six (that's the one nearest the palace, you remember?)—ah, he went quite pale. He read through your despatch, crumpled it up and stared through the window, then opened your despatch again and read it through very slowly, articulating the words under his breath. Then, without giving any orders, he went into his private room and slammed the door. Presently I heard him throw himself on his bed. Your messenger waited for a while and then continued on his round."

"Yes, yes. That was good, Himatrao. You observed very well. Now take this message to the commander of the palace guard."

He scribbled a note in English, ordering the instant relief and arrest of the captain of Guard-room Number Six.

Excellent, excellent. Only one disloyal. . . .

Nana Saheb rejoined the Resident, his face wreathed in smiles.

"It was nothing after all then?"

"Nothing Saheb. The doctor says the boy is really quite well. Just a little tired and run down, as you had so kindly suggested."

Of course, the Resident nodded to himself. Knew it all the time. These Indians get so worked up over nothing at all. Nervy, jumpy creatures. No balance. Plenty of brains but no stamina.

A sudden warm wind rustled through the trees, stirred the saris of the Indian women grouped about the lawn. A line of heavy clouds climbed slowly up the sky.



Nana Saheb ordered his carriage and drove slowly back to the city.

It was already growing dark, the quick green twilight of India fading into shadowy dusk.

Beside the road was an encampment of gypsies. The wild, haggard men leant upon their

bows, watching the cars and carriages returning from the Residency. They were naked save for a loin-cloth. Each had a quiver of arrows slung across his shoulder. Their women, naked from the waist up, squatted round the camp-fire stirring with blunt wood splinters the stew that sizzled in a huge jar. Their long, matted hair hung about their shoulders, their shapeless, wrinkled breasts pendulous and atremble. Twilight and shadow wove wild patterns on their still, dark faces, expressionless and masked with sweat and dust. Saffron banners, stirring above a low red tent, marked the dwelling of the small gods that the gypsies carry with them in their wanderings.

Nana Saheb rested his chin upon the palm of his hand.

What was to be done about the priests? So far as he knew only a few were disaffected, but those were powerful and influential. Their leader was, he knew, the *gosain* of the Krishna Temple.

. . . That old, old man. He has troubled this world long enough. Why doesn't he die? All his life he has been intriguing, mischievous, ambitious. . . .

It would be better if he died. But how? . . .

It would be very difficult to arrest him, still



harder to imprison him. Oh, there would be riots, shooting, questions in the Assembly at Delhi from those Radicals who never lost an opportunity of harassing the States; questions from the Resident; perhaps a Government enquiry. . . .

No, that's impossible. I must think.

When he reached the palace he went straight to his official room.

It was dark and he called for a light. A servant brought an oil-lamp. At the entry of this lamp Nana Saheb rose and bowed, clasping his hands under his chin in salutation. Holy Light, Essence of the Creator, receive my homage, O symbol of Vishnu!

Then he said to the servant: "Send Bhima to me."

Bhima was a Mang, one of the lowest castes, a giant in stature, almost Bantu in physique. He was devoted to Nana Saheb, who had once extricated him from a false murder case got up against him by his wife and her paramour, and who had ever since maintained him with a small pittance.

Bhima came in, salaamed, took off his turban and laid it on the ground, and, kneeling down, touched Nana Saheb's feet.

"Bhima, I have been good to you, haven't I?"

"Nana Saheb, you are my father and my mother. Under heaven I love no one but you."

"You will carry out any order I give you?"

"Even to my own death."

"And you will speak to no one of it?"

The Mang shook his head.

"Listen then."

"You will take a few men who can be relied on. You will disguise yourselves as dacoits. You will go to the Krishna Temple down in the river gorge within an hour from now. I shall provide you with a sword each and a gun for yourself. You will enter the temple and call out to the *gosain*. When he comes you will drag him outside—and I do not want even to hear of that old man again.

"You understand? . . . You are not to molest any of the other priests, nor on your life, Bhima, will you dare to touch any of the temple ornaments. You must give the impression of dacoits interrupted in the middle of their work.

"Now Bhima, I trust you. But if you fail me—well, I have still in my desk the papers of that old murder case."

"Nana Saheb, Nana Saheb"—the Mang again knelt and rubbed his forehead against Nana Saheb's feet—"I am your slave."

"Very well. Bring the men to the eastern palace gate about half an hour from now."

Bhima bowed and went out, grinning.

Nana Saheb sighed. He hated violence. That old *gosain* struggling—bah! Best not to think of it.

Presently he heard Usha's voice in the corridor. He went towards the door of his room. She came in out of the shadows.

They saluted each other ceremoniously.

"Any news, Nana Saheb? Oh, it was terrible—waiting, waiting at that garden party!"

"Good news, Maharani Saheb. I think most of the troops are loyal. I always knew that. A Maratha does not easily change his allegiance. Our enemies' only hope must have been in surprise. Now we are prepared and I do not think they will succeed. . . . Though, of course, we are still groping in the dark."

She nodded.

They sat a while in silence.

A voice whispered at the door: "Nana Saheb!"

The Brahman rose and went out into the passage.

One of his spies was awaiting him. His eyeballs gleamed very white.

"Well?"

"Nana Saheb, Princess Indira's boy has gone into the bazaar. The rising is timed at ten o'clock."

"Very well. Wait."

He came back and asked Usha, "Maharani Saheb, what shall we do about this boy of Princess Indira's? I do not know what hand he has in all this. He may be quite innocent. I am averse to unnecessary bloodshed. What do you advise?"

"What is this boy?"

"Her lover. Some wretched wrestler she has been keeping for three years. It is a public scandal."

Usha wrinkled her nose with disgust. That ugly, lean old woman making a fool of herself with a boy! At her age to be the talk of the bazaar!

(. . . Of course the boy must be in it. He probably hoped to be Raja, or looked forward to a time of greater luxury when Indira had triumphed.)

But to parade one's affections like that—so that even the bazaar loafers leered and tittered. And the horrible youth, simulating affection to rob an old woman of her jewels. Ugh, the whole thing was a disgrace to the princely caste.

She made an impatient gesture.

"The boy must be put away. There will be no difficulty about that?"

"None whatever, Maharani Saheb. He is too unimportant for enquiries to be made—except by the old woman. . . . We shall catch him as he comes back from the bazaar. We must do nothing as long as he is in the bazaar or people will see and gossip."

She nodded.

. . . The old woman will suffer when she hears her fancy-boy has vanished. Let her suffer—let her weep—she has grieved us before now. Now it is her turn.

"The boy must be killed, of course."

She smiled as though she could see the anguish on Indira's face.

"Killed."

"That would be the best thing. He knows too much, anyway. He would talk."

Nana Saheb went again to the door, and gave orders in a whisper to the spy, who bowed, showed a flash of white teeth in a comprehending grin, and vanished into the shadows.

Nana Saheb returned and seated himself.

It was a very quiet evening. The breeze had fallen.

"How hot it is!" said Usha.

"Yes," nodded Nana Saheb. "Very hot. The clouds are coming up. Perhaps there will be a storm."

A storm, a drenching downpour to cleanse the world of this haze of clinging heat.

Usha could see Wandan Hill, black against the ashen sky.

That ruined temple of Kali. People said it was haunted. You saw smoke rising from its deserted courts. Smoke; black, fat, coiling smoke . . . and the smell of fresh blood drifting faintly down the wind, so they said . . . there was a huge cloud coming up over the hill, a thunder-cloud.

What a still night it was, breathless, airless!

The clicking of lizards on the walls sounded strangely loud: chik-chak, chik-chak.

Usha moved in her chair, the basket-work creaking under her. Nana Saheb sat motionless as though entranced.

Suddenly in the city a tom-tom began to beat: Tok. Tok. Toktoktok.

A gourd-drum answered: Toonk. . . . Toonk. . . . Turrloonk.

For a few minutes they called to each other—feverish question and muffled, hesitant reply—across the stillness and suspense of the ex-

pectant night. And then upon a single beat they ceased, as though the hands of the drummers had been stayed, poised above the drums.

Silence again, a deathly hush.

In their room Nana Saheb and Usha waited.

Silence.

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**NIGHT**

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## PART IV

### NIGHT

IT was quite dark in the gardens of the Water Palace. At her window Princess Indira could hardly distinguish the outline of the mango-trees against the sky. Great clouds were banking up. The delicious breeze that had blown earlier in the evening had died away. It was hot, close and heavy.

Sadashiv was in one of his bad moods, petulant, sulky, querulous. The heat and the silence got on his nerves. It was a lonely and uncanny place, this old palace at night. And Princess Indira, who usually petted and mothered him when he was restless, now seemed to have forgotten his existence. She sat rigid in her chair, staring out of the window.

How still the city was to-night! Usually you heard it in the distance, a faint low murmur, throbbing and humming of guitars, pulse and thud of drums. Once a single tom-tom beat, hesitated, and petered out. And then everything was strangely, uncannily quiet.

He rolled over on his back and lay gazing at the ceiling. There were lots of little mirrors up

there, set in gilt stucco. But it was too dark to see anything—only a faint, far glimmer that was perhaps the reflection of his face.

He began to hum to himself a cheerful dance tune he had heard the other day, one of those lilting Punjabi airs. But the sound of his voice was strange in the hushed room. The silence was aggressive. He stopped in the middle of a bar and broke off with a curse.

. . . Here! I can't stand this. I'll go mad in a minute. Why in hell doesn't the old woman talk? Is she ill or something? I feel like making a scene, shouting and smashing things.

No, I know. I'll run down to the bazaar for a while.

He struggled to his feet and stood in the middle of the room, arms akimbo, a lock of hair hanging over his forehead, his thick childish lips pouting.

"I'm off to the bazaar for a short while. I'll be back soon."

The woman at the window swung round. He could not see her face, but her voice had a gasp in it.

"Oh no, no. . . . Sadashiv, you must be mad. Not to-night of all nights."

"I'm not mad, but I will be if I stay here any longer. I won't be away long, see?"

"No! You must not. I forbid it. Don't you understand?"

"Oh, be reasonable. I must have a breath of air. I won't get into trouble. I'll just stroll round and be back again in no time."

"Sadashiv, I implore you, for your own sake as well as mine. Sadashiv, I've been good to you, haven't I? We've been happy together...."

She began to cry, senile, maudlin tears.

This made him more obstinate. She treats one like a child, he thought, throwing back his hair with a defiant gesture—won't let me go out when I want to. I'm a man, and a fine man too; she's only an old woman.

She got up and came towards him, her hands outstretched. She took him by the shoulders.

"Sadashiv! . . . Sadashiv!"

"Oh, let go of me. What's all the fuss about, anyway?"

She tried to draw him to her. He pushed her aside and ran out of the room, slamming the door behind him. She heard his sandals clatter down the steps leading down from the verandah.

Gone! . . .

She sank back into her chair, and her old body was shaken with a fit of hard, dry sobbing.

But Sadashiv ran happily out into the night.

At the garden gateway two servants saluted him without rising—a confidential, almost conspiratorial, greeting. He paid no attention to them. One of them called jeeringly after him. He was always uneasy with the servants—either insolent and overbearing; or too familiar, finding relief in their racy gossip and interminable games of knuckle-bones after some quarrel with Indira.

The outskirts of the bazaar were deserted. A few rustic carts were ranged round an old banyan-tree. The skeleton of a cow lay against the wall, the rib-bones glimmering white, picked clean by vultures. A pariah dog shuffled off into the darkness. A jackal sped away, low and dark, belly against the ground.

Along the walls of the shuttered houses were small boxlike shrines. Faintly illumined by tiny oil-lamps—an eye, a menacing hand, a squat proboscis. A heavy Brahmanic face set in a remote unearthly grin. No god, but Anangke. Anangke of Angkor. The granite *khmer* grimace.

With hands clasped under her chin a young Brahman girl prayed before a shrine of Ganesh, Lord of Obstacles, patron god of students. "Help me to pass my examination to-morrow. Let me not fail again." Her heavy spectacles were

misted with her tears. She laid a handful of rose petals upon the floor of the shrine, which was patterned with alternate squares of black and yellow marble. She stared earnestly in towards the god. Two small eyes of mother-of-pearl, embedded deep in pouchy flesh on either side a curling scarlet trunk, glittered back at her.

Sadashiv hurried down the narrow winding street, his sandals clopping on the cobbles.

At the cross-roads a posse of police stood, leaning on long iron-shod staves. Sadashiv called out a greeting. They swung round; but when they saw who had called they turned back again.

"Well brothers, is there any news? It seems very quiet in the city to-night."

But they avoided his glance. They put their heads together and whispered among themselves. Sadashiv shrugged his shoulders. Thought no end of themselves, did the police.

He passed a temple of Rama. Torchlight glimmered smokily over carved columns and writhing gods. Priests lay prone before a crackling, incense-breathing fire. A naked priest, cross-legged on a high stool, chanted the Scriptures to a silent group of devotees squatting round him. Their faces were expressionless, their lips parted; the whites of their eyes were sickle

moons under drooping eyelids. They swayed slowly to the rhythm of the priest's chanting. Far within the shrine a red altar light gleamed upon the polished bronze of the image, upon the white marble of the face, the dark staring eyes, upon the peacock-plumed crown and gold-spangled kilt of the hero-king. A cymbal rang faintly—choong, choong, chong; fingers pattered softly on a kettledrum.

Presently the road opened out into the main bazaar. The noise was almost deafening after the stillness of the side streets. The cafés were brilliantly lit with flaring acetylene lamps set upon empty wooden cases. Gramophones blared out the latest songs from Bombay and Lahore—the wailing tenor of Agha Faiz, the passionate screech of Sunderabai. The iron tables set about the pavements were all occupied. People were drinking tea or sherbet, smoking black cigarettes, reading yellow vernacular papers. Old men chatted together, turbans pushed back from their foreheads, lean fingers tugging at scraggy beards. Young men sang, each with a Persian cap set at an angle upon a mop of waved and perfumed hair, a rose over one ear, a champak-flower held between finger and thumb. Serious and bespectacled students, wearing Gandhi caps and Khaddar shirts, discussed in high-pitched

nasal English the iniquities of the Viceroy's latest ordinance.

"We warn the Government" they cried, carefully enunciating each syllable, "to show a change of heart before it is too late. This dance of tyranny is simply annoying all good sons of the Motherland——"

And at the neighbouring table the Persian-capped Mussulmans burst into a scream of laughter and banged their glasses upon the iron table. They had just been repeating the latest jest of the dancer Guli concerning a persistent but ugly admirer.

"She said that? *Ya, Allah!* The woman is the very soul of wit."

"And," nodded a querulous old man with a grievance against the *patel* of his village, "I told him, if you do not enter my nephew's name properly in the village record, I will inform against you. I will send anonymous petitions. I will write to the police, saying that you are troubling poor people all day long, that you flog them until they are quite tired. But he simply would not listen. Ah, Shiva! Shiva!—what is one to do with a mad buffalo like that in charge of one's village?"

But other groups, with heads close together over the tables, were whispering:



"What are these rumours of impending trouble? . . ."

"I do not know. . . . But there seem to be a lot of police in the city to-night. . . ."

"Yes, yes. And soldiers everywhere."

"What does it mean? . . ."

But their voices were drowned in the noise of the crowd. Bicycles came jangling past. Carriages swayed and jolted; the drivers cursing each other, cracking their whips, shouting at their ponies mingled abuse and praise.

Sadashiv elbowed his way along the thronging pavements.

The noise and lights and smell of dust and rose-water and sweating humanity were like an elixir to him. He squared his shoulders and breathed deeply. Ah, the thrill of a city at night, the infectious excitement of moving crowds, the shouts and laughter, the grinning faces passing like dreams against the blur of lighted shops!

A drink. Yes, a cool draught of English beer. There should be a liquor shop at the corner there. Hullo! There don't seem to be any people there. Usually they're lounging about in the street all round the doorway.

But the liquor shop was barred and shuttered. Two policemen leant against the door, their

arms folded above iron-shod staves, their sandalled feet tapping negligently against the doorstep.

"What is this, brothers?"

"The liquor shops are all closed to-night."

"Why ever?"

The policemen shrugged their shoulders.

"Orders of the Durbar."

"But this is tyranny. It is worse than the days of the Moguls. We suffered less at the hands of Nadr Shah."

They remained silent, unconcerned. All orders are obscure. Men who try to understand them are fools. Dark is the mind of a prince.

"Come, brothers, let me go in. Just me. You know who I am?"

One of the policemen looked straight at Sadashiv and then spat past him into the road. Yesterday they might have humoured him. After all he was the favourite of a princess and the decrees of fate are inscrutable. One day—who knows? . . . But to-day they had heard that this upstart was no longer safe. So they spat. They had been chewing pan and betel-nut and the colour of their spittle was blood-red.

Sadashiv swung on his heel.

What was the matter with everybody? These police really are the limit. Gosh, I hope those

plans of Indira's succeed. He had hardly considered seriously the problem of the old woman's endless intrigues. She was always gabbling away about her plans. You got tired of hearing about them. This last business—it might be more serious—or she might have got rather more silly. But supposing it's serious? Supposing she meant it when she said she'd be the real ruler of the State? . . . Well, I'll give those policemen something to think about. I'll remember their faces, you can be sure about that. I'll see they're dismissed. Oh, worse than dismissed. Beaten—yes, beaten on the soles of their feet.

He turned down into the street of the Dancers.

There was no traffic here; but the street was crowded with men, standing grouped together in laughing, gossiping groups—or sauntering along gazing up at the courtesans who leaned upon their balconies, their heads outlined against the brilliant light of the room behind, whence came the thrumming of guitars and the tap of *tublas*. The women's plump, bare arms glittered with heavy bracelets. Languidly they lifted cigarettes to dark-painted lips. Fashionable youths, swinging down the street arm in arm, called the women by their names, receiving obscene jests in reply. Old, bearded Mussulmans stood debating gravely on the perfections of the

various singers. As experts they appraised or criticised the curve of a thigh and the slant of an eyebrow. They wagged their beards over these deep questions, emphasising their adjectives with elaborate gestures. Below each balcony sleek young men with red faces and high-necked polo jumpers declaimed with furious rhetoric, exhausting the resources of language to describe the charms of their ladies—spreading out their arms to indicate the generous breadth of a hip, bringing the palms of their be-ringed hands a few inches apart to show the delicious narrowness of a waist. And on the balconies above the women lolled, with painted faces like masks and heavy sultry eyes, gazing calmly over the seething, bobbing heads and the blur of pale upturned faces, puffing lazily at perfumed cigarettes and tapping the ash out over the turbans of the passers-by.

Sometimes the balcony would be empty, and the inner room shrouded by a pink curtain; and then you would hear the sound of laughter and clapping, the rhythmic stamp of bare feet, the jingling of ankle-bells, clack of castanets, faint chiming of plucked *sitars*, and the long, watery notes of *sarangis*.

Sadashiv sauntered down the street. The pulsing drums bucked softly at his heart. Jangling

ankle-bells and rasp of brocaded skirts—odour of musk and mango-flowers—the excited stir and murmur of the crowd—laughing faces and fever-bright eyes—parted lips and gleaming, hungry teeth—soft hands that brushed his lightly in the crowd—stench of rank sweat and rancid oil—women and women and women, around, beside and above: jewelled, nail-gilded feet tapping impatiently on the rose-strewn platforms of carpet-hung balconies; slow rise and fall of shapely breasts under tight gold bodices; glint of long, dark eyes, brightened with belladonna, enlarged with kohl! . . . and always the intoxicating breath of music in the air, faint murmur of *tublas* and the enticing, languorous melodies of muted strings.

Now Sadashiv stood before the house of Baba Jan, most elegant and accomplished of courtesans. She had no raucous advertiser at her door, for she was known of all; and those who were admitted even to hear her sing were envied by their friends.

Sadashiv knocked, and after a while a young boy opened the door and led him up a rickety wooden staircase and into the long upper room. Brilliant lights shone in globes that were painted to represent print—ripe amber mangoes, green-

veined papaias and clusters of bloom-dusted grapes. Whitewashed walls were hung with gaudy mats and a thick, Tyrian-flowered carpet covered the cow-dunged floor. Bolsters of coloured silk were piled along the walls for visitors to recline against.

A group of musicians squatted in a corner. Baba Jan herself sat cross-legged on a wide square cushion in the middle of the room.

She did not look up at Sadashiv's entry. Her long disdainful face, with its delicately chiselled nose and thin bitter mouth, was painted a soft cream-white. Within a frame of heavy kohl her eyes were cloudy, lifeless, drugged.

With thin painted fingers she picked at a pan leaf, shredding the brittle stalk from the yellowing, fragrant leaf.

Sadashiv squatted down against the wall.

"Make me some pan, Baba Jan."

She nodded, laid the leaf flat on the carpet, and from a silver box beside her took a tiny spoon brimming with white paste which she spread over the leaf. Then from the same box she took a handful of cloves, cardamom and crushed betel-nuts and sprinkled over the paste. Folding the leaf over so that it was shaped like a rough envelope, she fastened the corners with the stalk.

She rose slowly and with a ceremonious salute gave the little packet of spices to Sadashiv, who popped it into his mouth and sat chewing, savouring happily the sharp flavour of the spices.

Baba Jan placed beside him a long-necked silver jar for use as a spittoon. Then she squatted down upon her cushion and sat silent. Her hands were folded in her lap and her long eyes were fixed upon a pattern of the carpet in front of her.

"Have you any alcohol in the house?" Sadashiv asked presently.

Baba Jan shrugged her shoulders and glanced towards the musicians.

"There is some beer," ventured the drummer.

"Bring some—bring three or four bottles. Will you drink, Baba Jan?"

She made a gesture of distaste.

"Very well, three bottles then. And, here! These are for you."

He took a handful of cigarettes, good English cigarettes, out of his waist-band and threw them to the musicians. They salaamed gratefully. It was a great treat for them. While the drummer was away getting the beer they lit one cigarette, passing it from mouth to mouth, each in his turn inhaling with closed eyes and face puckered up with ecstatic enjoyment, and then handing on

the cigarettes to his neighbour with many compliments to Sadashiv upon the quality of the tobacco. They would save up the other cigarettes, they assured him; never had they so enjoyed a smoke.

The drummer returned with three beer-bottles under his arm and a glass. He wiped the latter with ostentatious exactitude upon the tail of his shirt before setting it before Sadashiv, then opened one bottle and tilted it over the glass. The beer plopped out jerkily, gushed heavily and rose in white froth. Pale amber lights gleamed within the dark liquid. Sadashiv lifted the glass to his lips. It was cold and the bitter tang was delicious, refreshing to his dust-parched lips.

He drained the glass, opened another. Ah! . . . that was better.

“Will you sing, Baba Jan?”

She turned slowly and said something to the musicians. They tuned their instruments: the drummer with a little silver hammer knocking tighter the clasp that stretched taut the face of the drum; and then laying his turban on the ground and arranging it into a sort of nest, he set the drum therein tilted towards him at a convenient angle and began to exercise his lean fingers with quick taps and sonorous rhythms and feverish tattoos.



When they were ready they nodded to each other; and the *sitar* player plucked the strings of his long gourd-shaped instrument, the *sarangi* player drew his great crescent bow slowly over the shimmering strings of the *sarangi*, drawing forth delicious sighing notes, ethereal as cadences of bird-song, and the drummer struck his drum alternately with the hard tips of his fingers and with his wrist, a quick patter followed by a pounding resonance.

Baba Jan, without lifting her head, began to hum far back in her throat. Presently she raised her eyes and the dull heaviness in them had gone. They were alight with a leaping golden flame. She sang a *ghazel* of Hafiz, four short lines of Persian. Sadashiv did not understand them, but knew from her gestures that she was singing of the brevity of youth and love's sad evanescence. She moved her painted hands—nails gilded and palms vermilion-tinted—with slow gestures of melancholy resignation. And her voice rose stronger and stronger. Her face became transfigured. The lines of bitterness and disdain were gone, her lithe body swayed and rocked with emotion. She was like a young animal rejoicing in her strength, so perfect an instrument for her art did she know herself to be.

All must grow old, dark is the future, and

remembered kisses are bitter on the lips. But still the world is lovely, lovely the honeyed wines of Shiraz and dew-blown roses in a white-walled garden, lovely the breeze of spring that stirs the blossom in a cherry orchard, lovely the evening sky behind an orange-tree laden with golden globes of fruit.

Sadashiv leant his head against the wall and closed his eyes. His flesh crept with sensuous pleasure.

The music rose to a climax and stopped suddenly.

Baba Jan remained for a moment rigid, entranced by her own singing, her slim arms outstretched. Then she seemed to shrink back upon herself, her arms relaxed and fell limp against her side, the light died out of her face.

Sadashiv sighed and said:

“Now sing the *Durbari*.”

Baba Jan looked up as though aware for the first time of his presence and smiled. The musicians, too, smiled and nodded excitedly amongst themselves.

The *Durbari*, that magnificent and tragic melody, loveliest of all Indian *rāgs*, was composed by the mad Emperor Muhammad Tughlak, who, in the intervals of building new capitals, massacring his subjects, evolving a

paper currency and invading China, attained to a mastery of the art of music that has not been equalled in Asia. The marvellous song that was the summit of his work has always been known as the Durbari, that is to say "the Royal"—not only in complimentary allusion to its imperial composer, but as truly descriptive of its tremendous and noble beauty. Tradition decrees that it may only be sung at night, and when the Emperor Akbar, in one of his frequent moods of megalomania, ordered his musician Tamsen to sing it at high noon, insisting despite the latter's tearful entreaty, no sooner had the first dramatic chords rang out than with a clap of thunder the world was enveloped in darkness.

But now night had fallen and it was the time appropriate to the Durbari.

Baba Jan laid her head in her hands for a moment, pondering which words she should sing—for as with all *rāgs* the words are to be chosen at the discretion of the singer, whose art consists in the skill with which the words are fitted to the tune and in the subtle modulations introduced in the rendering of the theme.

And there came into her mind the famous threnody of the Emperor Bahadur Shah, the lamentation that he wrote in exile after his defeat and capture by the English. From the

memory of those frightful days when Delhi lay beleaguered by the berserk troops of Nicholson—from the shame and terror of his fright, borne in a tattered palanquin away from the doomed and smoking city—from that nightmare horror, the slaughter of his family before his very eyes—from the haunting vision of his favourite son Saleem (lovely, lovely Saleem with the long eyes and red pouting mouth) as he reeled and screamed and fell under Hodson's bullets—from the extreme agony of the past the old man had distilled the quintessence of exquisite melancholy, softened and refined by the conventions of Persian art, but more moving in the poignant sincerity of absolute grief than all the intricate compositions of his youth; when, wandering among the rose-beds of the Mogul gardens under a yellow moon, in friendly rivalry with the poets of his court he would improvise delicate quatrains to the tinkling of onyx-studded lutes, when the jewels still glowed in the walls of the imperial pavilions, and courtiers clustered like fire-flies by lotus-fringed pools, and turbaned heads bowed to the earth in homage to the Padishah, the descendant of Tamerlane.

The drum began with a low thrilling roll, the *sitar* throbbed in feverish *pizzicato*, the great curved bow of the *sarangi* player swept the sob-

bing strings, and Baba Jan threw back her head and sang, her voice rising rich and beautiful, her body shivering like a bird in the ecstasy of his mating song, her hands moving in slow, rhythmic gestures like white fluttering moths.

"Ah! Ah!" cried Sadashiv, striking his fist upon his knee.

He closed his eyes and laughed with excitement, his head wagging drunkenly. Her voice rose and rose; it was the cry of a sorrowing world, Promethean, immortal.

*What was that?*

A shot. A shot! . . .

And now others. What did it mean? Another and another.

Cries and the crash of breaking glass. Clatter of horse-hoofs and shouts of command.

And more shots. . . .

Baba Jan stopped dead.

The musicians broke off and stared at each other. What is happening? All day there have been rumours. Who is fighting? Out there, a hundred yards away, men have been killed . . . are being killed. . . .

*Listen to that shriek!*

They sat in silence in the glaring light of that upper room.

. . . Is there trouble all over the city?

What is happening to my children? . . . and mine? Often they play in the streets. They may be playing there now, all unaware, and then the tearing, frantic crowd will come, will trample them down, and the plunging horsemen—oh, what will happen?

. . . And my old mother often goes out at this time to get some milk for me to drink on my return. . . .

Baba Jan, after the first chill shock, soon recovered her composure. She shrugged her shoulders, arranged the gold of her sari over her carefully parted hair, readjusted one of her long earrings. Her face resumed its disdainful calm. These men and their quarrels—fools, fools.

Sadashiv rose to his feet, excited. He'd been away too long. He must go back, back to Indira. He drew a couple of notes from under his turban, laid them on the ground in front of Baba Jan, and ran noisily downstairs.

It was very quiet in the street.

Where is everyone?

Gone, gone. . . . Dark emptiness. Shuttered windows. Whispers behind drawn curtains.

A single sandal lay in the middle of the street, ridiculous, pathetic.

Sadashiv turned the corner.

No one. Not a voice, not an echo, not a footfall stirred.

Against the wall a huddled figure, head lolling; a thin, dark trickle seeping out from under his blanket. Over there a man lay on his face, arms outspread, fingers clutching the cobbles.

Overhead a window opened cautiously. Heads clustered together, peered out uncertainly.

Sadashiv stopped and called out:

“What has happened brothers?” A shriek, and the shutter clanged to.

He broke into a run.

The street narrowed to a dark alley. I must hurry, hurry. Indira will be waiting. What has happened? God, it's dark in here, dark, dark. I can't see at all.

A turban-cloth flung neatly over his head clutched him by the neck. A rifle-butt caught him behind the knees. They were on him. He struggled like an animal in a trap. They pulled him down, cursing, gasping, choking. The cobble-stones bit hard into his back.



In the shrine of Krishna by the river gorge acolytes had lit the altar candles and the great carved lamps which, veiled in saffron cloth,

hung between the pillars and palely illumined the writhing figures that swarmed over the grey walls.

Eunuch priests, robed as women, sat cross-legged in the centre of the temple, gently swinging the *gosain* in a pendant seat.

When he sat thus, garlanded, smeared with coloured powder, his back to the altar, he symbolised the Vaishnavite divinity incarnate in flesh.

The eunuchs sat in silence, swinging their Priest God, their ox-eyes gazing fixedly at his wrinkled, wizened face.

He cleared his throat and spat. There was a rush and scramble, cries and shrill giggles. The eunuchs flung themselves on the floor, and the most active of them, having elbowed the others aside, licked up the gobbet of holy spittle. He then sat by himself, leaning against a pillar, his pouching face irradiating bliss.

Presently two other eunuchs brought a flat earthen vessel full of warm water. They stilled the movement of the pendant seat, and set the vessel beneath the *gosain's* shrunken, blue-veined feet. With lowered heads, murmuring ecstatic prayers, they washed his feet, wrinkled and filmed with dust. Then they drank the water thus sanctified.



The *gosain* sat motionless, oblivious of the ritual. Only the quick eyes, hard and black like rain-sleek berries, moved in the mask of his face. Usually he stirred and smiled to feel the soft, epicene hands curving under his feet, ripple of finger-tips over his shrinking soles, velvet-cushioned thumbs kneading his ankles. But tonight he took no pleasure in the eunuchs' gentle touch, nor in the comfortable caress of scented water.

Why had no further message come from Indira? Just that quick whisper of the soldier at dawn; and then silence. He was disturbed. He felt a sudden spasm of anger at sight of the eunuchs cowed at his feet: humble, devoted animals, mindless, sexless. . . . Why can't they hurry? I must go out. I must go to the city. That fool Wallab rolls bloodshot eyes and throws his head back, rolling on a flabby neck, as he drinks the water.

It was hot.

No breath of air stirred the heavy temple hangings. The altar candles burned steadily, amber dagger lights, erect and firm. The old man felt beads of sweat rise on his brow.

"There, there. You have finished. And now my palanquin. D'you understand? my palanquin."

They goggled at him, stared at each other. The nightly ceremonial was not finished. The *gosain's* loin-cloth had to be washed in another vessel and the water thereof drunk. This was the ritual. Never before had it been curtailed.

"Gosain Maharaj!" they gabbled.

The old man wriggled in his swing, his thin legs kicking, straining to reach the ground.

"Help me out, you fools!" His wheezing voice broke into a cough.

They clustered round, patting his hard dry ribs with boneless hands.

He wriggled his way off the swing, flopped heavily upon the ground, struggled to his feet.

"I want my palanquin. Bring it at once lest I curse you and you die, and fall into a lower birth."

They ran down the pillared colonnades, twittering like frightened birds, clapping and calling. Disturbed by their clamour, bats dropped from the arches and swooped across the temple court.

"Gosain Maharaj's palanquin!" their shrill voices screamed excitedly, echoing and re-echoing among the shadows.

The old man leant against a pillar. What a still night it was! A clinging, heavy air, tight

about his temples. Something was going on up there in the city, something stealthy and quiet. Oh, hurry, hurry, hurry!

He began to stagger down the temple, reeling from pillar to pillar, gasping and coughing.

. . . Ah, thank God, there's the palanquin. Two stalwart male priests clattered upon sandalled feet out into the courtyard, the palanquin swaying upon their shoulders. Eunuchs carried torches, resinous, blue-flamed.

They helped the old man in.

"Hurry! Hurry!" he muttered feverishly.

"Yes, Gosain Maharaj," the eunuchs answered soothingly, patting and stroking him.

The palanquin rose, the old man clutching the bamboo sides. The torches leaped and crackled, spurting steely smoke.

It was very dark outside the temple, dark and quiet. The torches roared up towards the sky, glinting along metallic domes of overarching foliage. Twigs cracked like pistol-shots under sandalled feet. Pebbles rattled and plomped into the river. Branches tore at the silken curtains of the litter. The bearers panted and stumbled.

How clumsy they are! Quick, oh, quicker! But we shall move easily once over the crest of the gorge. How much farther up is it?

He leaned out and saw a lantern quavering

among the undergrowth. Curious! Who can have left their lantern in such a place? And what's that, a bear crouching there?

Not a bear, but a man. . . . Oh, many men.

They rise up, blotting out the light of their lantern.



Why doesn't Sadashiv return? It's quite dark now. That last pale sheen along the horizon has faded and the stars are brightening overhead. The lake is still and dark, you cannot catch a ripple or gleam across its ebon surface. And the mango-trees, opaque and black, do not stir. Even the night-birds seem asleep.

Indira sat on at her window.

. . . He doesn't return. He'll never return. He's tired of me. I'm so old now. In the mornings when I look in my mirror I could weep with rage and grief. It cannot be me, that wrinkled face, shrunk back upon the bones, on either side of a great hooked nose. But it is. And that's how he sees me, he who is so fresh and lovely, his soft-bloomed face warm with sleep, opening dreamy eyes in the dawn beside me, and seeing there an old woman with lined and yellow face and thin straggly hair. In my robes,

with my face painted carefully, there is at least some dignity in me, a style . . . but not in the haggard dawn on a rumpled bed.

He must have found some other girl, some silly young peasant who flatters him and listens to his boastings, opening babyish eyes. He's not clever or well born, he'll be pleased with some giggling child. He's stupid and selfish—and oh, God, why do I care for him? But I do. Ah, how I love him, his golden oval face, his lithe young body, the electric feel of his hands! If I lose him I cannot live.

And every year I grow older.

But I was never beautiful, like the simpering ninnies of the court. I had art and a nimble tongue, and I rode as well as a man. But now I can't ride, and I often feel too weary or anxious to talk. I'd like just to sit here in the warm darkness and stroke his hair, and feel his head resting against my thigh, I in my chair, and he coiled drowsily upon the floor.

But he is gone. . . .

Oh, he is a fool! And I could make him a prince . . .

Just then she heard the voice of one of her agents calling from the garden.

"Maharani Saheb!"

She leant over the window-sill. She could see below her the blur of an upturned face.

"Yes, what is it?"

"Maharani Saheb, I have brought a palanquin to the gate. You must escape. Now—immediately. There has been shooting in the bazaar. People are being arrested and taken to prison. I passed a squad of soldiers on their way here."

Ah, what does it matter? . . . He has gone. . . . Even if my plans had succeeded, how could I be happy without him? I should only be more lonely.

"Maharani Saheb!"

She did not answer. She drew back into the room.

"Are you there, Maharani Saheb?"

Patter of sandalled feet. A second voice cried, "Lady! Lady! you must hurry! The soldiers are coming!"

But she wouldn't say anything. She sat silent in the dark room.

In the garden below the men whispered together.

There was a crash at the garden gate.

The two men cried out and ran.

Servants at the gate shouted, "You cannot come here!"

Harsh voices yelled back abuse. Rifle-butts crashed on yielding, splintering wood. A man screamed and the gate fell in.

Footsteps ran clattering down the path, came in at the door of the house.

"Now where is she?"

"I don't know Master."

"Oh, don't you?"

"Ah! I will tell you—I will tell you anything—but don't hit me again. Oh, you have broken my arm! Oh, oh! Yes, yes, Master, I am leading you now; this way, Captain Saheb, up the stairs."

They were at the door. They pushed it open and stood in the doorway, soldiers carrying lanterns.

Indira sat motionless on her chair in the corner. She did not blink at the sudden light, nor flinch at the savage shout they gave when they saw her.

"Here she is!" The captain of the guard laughed coarsely. "Salaam, Maharani Saheb."

She said very slowly, "I think you have made a mistake, Captain. This is my house. I never asked you to come here."

The captain stood with arms folded across his chest, swaying slightly backwards and forwards, feasting his eyes on the fallen princess.

Once, long ago, in the days of the old Maha-

raja, this captain had had a quarrel with the *patel* of his village over a piece of land which was his, had been his family's for centuries. The *patel* coveted it. The *patel* was a favourite of Princess Indira's, and Indira was then all-powerful. She had secured his appointment over the heads of many more deserving persons. In the courts the *patel* won the case. The sub-judge would not have dared to give a decision adverse to one who was in favour at court. Everyone knew that. And so, to gratify a client of hers, she had reduced to beggary a family of Maratha yeomen who had served the State from the beginning of time. Nana Saheb knew the whole story. He had promised to dismiss the *patel* and restore that piece of land to the captain's family, if the captain carried out properly his present instructions. And it was a very welcome duty.

"That's quite all right, Maharani Saheb. We'd come to arrest you. What d'you think about that? Eh?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"I refuse to leave this house."

The captain came closer.

"I have orders to remove you by force."

At that she lost her temper.

"Are you mad? Is that the way to talk to a Kshatriya princess?"



Her face was white with anger.

"I don't know about princesses. I've got my orders," he grunted sullenly, intimidated for a moment by her fury.

Suddenly she crumpled up. She felt so old and tired.

"Where are you taking me to?"

"I don't know yet. We were to be told later."

"Captain, give me a few minutes in which to pack."

"Very well, Maharani Saheb, I'll wait outside. You, Tuka, and you, Himot, both of you stand on guard here."

"And, Captain . . ."

He turned. Her voice was humble, pleading. Aha, she was coming round, was she? That's a better tone to adopt.

"Yes?"

"Captain, do you know anything of—of Sadashiv?"

He laughed. She had risen from her chair and looked piteously towards him. He felt proud and brutal. Since she had caused his ancestral land to be given to another . . .

"Sadashiv?" he laughed boisterously. "Why, he was arrested."

She put her hands to her side. She felt very weak and helpless.

"Oh? . . . And what will they do to him?"

"Kill him, of course. I heard they were going to tie him down to the railway line. The Bombay mail passes at midnight."

Railway line. . . . What does he mean? Ah, no, it's impossible, impossible.

. . . But I mustn't show any emotion. Not before these low-bred peasants. I can see them watching me, gloating. They lift their lanterns to see how I take that news.

"Thank you, Captain. It was kind of you to tell me. I will pack now."

When the door was shut she sank back on her chair.

Long, blue-gleaming lines leaping clean along the yellow downs. Wide hills under the starry sky. But in a shadowy hollow, where the lines dip into obscure gloom . . . a prostrate figure, a shapeless, white cocoon, swathed, huddled. The face is muffled, the mouth gagged. Only the restless, tortured eyes blink up at the stars. Or perhaps he is tied down on his stomach, and those eyes stare, as though mesmerised, at a square foot of jagged pebbles and a little tuft of stonecrop.

The jackals are calling in the hills, calling, calling——

But that was not a jackal. It was a scream, a whistle. Yes, the Bombay mail. It comes very fast, leaping like a bright comet over the empty yellow downs, shooting through dusky hollows, with a flourish of scarlet sparks and sulphur-yellow canopy of smoke. Listen, it comes chug-chugging up that hill—you can hear the steady rhythm beating over the sleepers. And then . . . round the corner, the long sleek boiler, a tuft of feathery smoke at the funnel, a steely sheen of wheels, and the swaying faces at the windows—the lighted windows, where people sit and smoke and are secure and happy—and in their path a bound and muffled figure, moving, jerking convulsively, like a blind chrysalis that feels the stir of sprouting wings. Look, *can't they see?* I shriek out and warn them, but the train comes on—rises, blotting out the sky—and the wheels are whirring scimitars.

*Aie! . . . Aie!*

Outside the captain squatted on the steps, chatting with his men.

“Will they really do that to Sadashiv, Captain Saheb?”

“Don't know. Hope so, I'm sure. It's what they used to do in my father's time to politically-minded persons—and a jolly good thing too.

It's what I'd do to that young swine. But I don't know really what'll happen to him. I told the old woman that to frighten her. Silly old bitch wasting her time and money on fancy-boys. He doesn't care a damn about her. They caught him on his way back from Baba Jan's. The old woman deserves all she gets. And I've had a score to settle with her for a long time."

Ah, but now that land would be his again. A lovely fertile plot it was—on a hillside, washed by a hill torrent. They had banked it up into terraces, spent some of their savings on good English manure; and the crops were a sight to make a man laugh with pleasure. When he was a boy he used to stand there with his father in the evenings, and they would gloat together over the young green corn springing thickly from the earth, the rich red earth they had ploughed in turn, bent and sweating over their single primitive plough. Instinctively, peasant-like, he had loved that land with a hard, fierce satisfaction. It was part of his flesh and bone, enriched by the sweat of his fathers, deep and sweet with the blood of their race. Soon he would take leave and go back to his village. How happy his poor old father would be when their fields were restored to them! Once more they would be the leading family in the village,

prosperous and envied. He would sit with his father on a cot at the door of their house in the warm evenings, and they would smoke contentedly together, and the other villagers would squat round them and ask their advice, and bring them a jar of sweet milk as a tribute of respect.

Presently the captain rose to his feet and went back into the silent house. The two soldiers whom he had left on guard sprang to attention at his approach. He threw open the door with a clatter.

There she sat, crouching in her chair, her eyes dilated. But when the light of the captain's lantern fell on her she chattered like a monkey, and screamed with insane laughter.



Shahu put his hand to his forehead.

He had an aching headache. Shouldn't have taken two doses of opium like that. But what else? It would be a strain, the Durbar and then the garden party and, finally, the procession—no, there'd been no procession. Why was that? He couldn't remember.

The datura brooded over his brain like a

viscous fog. And the vivifying effect of the opium had worn off.

"Sing to me," he said to the musician. And the boy twanged his zither and, raising his soft voice, sang an invocation to Krishna. A sad little song falling away in melancholy quarter-tones.

How hot it was; damp and sultry. The palace seemed very quiet.

Shahu felt deeply depressed. This place is bad for me. I should go away. Go to England for a while. I was happy there. People were kind to me; my friends, young fair-haired friends at Oxford.

He turned over on his couch. From the window he could see Wandan Hill and the ruined Temple of Kali.

The moon had risen and rode in majesty on the crest of jagged clouds. How beautiful the moon was! Men called it the topaz in the tawny hair of Shiva.

But the clouds mounted higher and higher, lapped over and engulfed the moon. Her wan rays pierced but rarely through gaps in the advancing testudos of the storm. The houses of the city glinted dully, steel cubes set amid vapours of thin milky green. Wandan Hill was a wash of peacock sheen and the Kali Temple reared

the stark ribs of its roofless colonnades, startlingly clear. A thick column of smoke rose steadily from the ruins, fat brown smoke, coiling and spreading outwards in the still air.

"Boy! d'you see that?"

The musician ran forward.

"What, Maharaj?—see what?"

"Smoke!"—his voice was a whisper—"smoke rising from the Kali Temple. I'd always heard about it. They say it portends a death in the Royal House. Don't you see it?"

"Maharaj, there is no smoke. Only a great thunder-cloud coming up over Wandan Hill."

"What!" He rolled out of bed, leaned over the window-sill, craned out into the night.

"Yes, a cloud . . . just where I saw the smoke before. But it was smoke I saw. Brown, coiling smoke. Not that heavy pouch of gun-metal cloud. . . . Yet I don't know."

His breath was coming in short gasps, his heart beating like a drum. Oh, that had been a shock.

. . . That terrible Rani, I used to have nightmares about her when I was small. How can people be so cruel? The young delicate children, screaming. . . . She was my great-grandmother.

He laughed nervously, rolled back on to a chair and shook with hysterical merriment.

Suddenly he heard the rattle of distant shooting and froze into listening immobility.

"Maharaj, I warned you!" the musician broke out. He hid his face in his hands and rolled over on to his side.

"Yes," nodded Shahu heavily. "You did tell me and I was angry. But there is trouble in the city."

He clapped his hands, called out to the servants who should be squatting outside the door.

There was no response.

"Where is everybody?"

The musician sobbed quietly.

Shahu ran to the door, pulled aside the curtain.

Nobody.

. . . But where on earth are they all gone?

The passage stretched away into empty gloom. At the corner the mirrors glimmered faintly. The light from the aperture of a balcony fell upon the armour of one of the Lion Men, a lonely, eerie figure there in the shadows.

He called again . . . was it his own shadow that moved in the mirror?

"Where is everybody?" he repeated, like a child.

He walked down the passage. The Lion Man seemed to watch him come.

He began to shout wildly. The echo of his



own voice answered him. His steps rang very loud in the silence.



Nana Saheb had left Usha for a moment. He had promised to return soon. She could not bear the suspense alone.

Never before had she understood the torture of waiting—waiting for news that never seemed to come. Nana Saheb had reassured her. Everything would be all right. The troops were loyal. Suspects were under observation and would be soon arrested—perhaps had already been arrested. There was nothing really to worry about. Only the strain of this intolerable waiting.

Yet, in spite of the mental torture, she felt physically better than she had for a long while past. The storm that she had been always expecting had at last broken—was already drifting away.

She began to think of Shahu tenderly, almost lovingly. She thought of the old days of their courtship and marriage, and no longer did these memories tear her heart with misery. They must start again and try to mend their broken lives. Go away to England. Take a country house there and live together there with Chandu, away from this horrible palace. Shahu would

get stronger and soon shake off his lethargy. She would try and awaken his interest in simple, homely things. Perhaps it was her fault that they had so drifted apart. She ought to have tried harder to combat his affliction, never to have bothered him, always been gentle and understanding and loving. In England it would be different. There would just be the two of them and Chandu. They could ride together, as they used to do in Krishnagad, and Chandu would play in a garden of English flowers under rain-washed skies.

She heard a sudden noise in the courtyard.

It must be Nana Saheb returning. She rose and went to the window. A group of soldiers were standing against the wall in the shadows. There was a man in the middle. They were tying his hands behind his back, untying a turban that had been looped about his neck. Some wretched prisoner, she said to herself. Well, he was safely looped in the palace now. No escape. The gate was barred behind him. She heard the cross-beams clang into place.

Torches, clamped to the walls, shone on the bare shoulders of the soldiers as they bent over their work, their muscles rolled under bronze skin, sleek with sweat.

The prisoner began to weep.

"Why are you taking me away? I have done—nothing. . . . Where are you taking me to?"

The soldiers had finished tying his hands. They straightened up, squared their shoulders, and took up the rifles they had piled against the wall. The prisoner stumbled forward, head lolling from side to side with weariness and pain. He came out into the pool of yellow light in the centre of the courtyard. Usha craned forward.

He raised his head for a moment as though imploring Heaven for pity, and the torchlight fell obliquely on his face.

Cold and rigid as one in a nightmare, unable to move or cry, she stared at his uplifted face. There swept over her the memory of a night when she had lain in a boy's arms under an old tree—around them the tiny rustle of dry leaves and occasional patter of banyan berries that had ripened and rotted between dawn and dusk, the distant murmur of the fair, and far away the melancholy cry of a night-bird, the melting sob of the *chakor* who feeds upon the radiance of the camphor-dropping moon. Never, never in all her million lives to come would she know again such ecstasy. Dewy-soft, his mouth had breathed endearments sweeter than the notes of Krishna's

flute. Cool as the lilies of the dawn, his cheek by hers; and in her last frantic farewell the very *alba* of desire.

No, no. It was impossible, impossible. She must be going mad to fancy any resemblance. And that memory, the phantom of a haunting dream, that had for a moment bobbed about near the surface of her mind, sank heavily to sunless depths.

The soldiers flung open a door and ordered their prisoner to enter. As he stepped forward, bowed and helpless, into menacing darkness, his drooping head seemed very childish and pathetic.

She came back into the room, trembling, wet with sweat. She passed a hand across her forehead and sank heavily into her chair.

I must get Chandu.

I must do something to occupy my mind. Yes, yes; get Chandu.

But at that moment she heard Shahu crying and stumbling down the long corridor.

She ran out into the passage.

Shahu had paused for a moment by a balcony. He was staring out into the night.

When he heard the tap of her sandals on the bare boards he swung round.

"Usha! Is anything wrong?"

"Wrong? What d'you mean?"

"You look so white. Your face is like a ghost's."

She raised her hand to her forehead. It was clammy with cold sweat.

"Nothing, oh, nothing. It is so hot and I have a headache. That garden party was very tiring, wasn't it? I always feel——"

"But, Usha, did you hear that shooting?"

"Yes." Her voice was steady and calm now, her eyes hard and level.

"What was it? What's been happening in the city?"

"There was some fighting."

"Ah?" He shrank back.

She felt a surge of bitter scorn.

"Yes, fighting. Your soldiers were fighting to save you, your throne and the heritage of your house from Princess Indira."

"But, but . . . were people killed? Is it all over now? Are we safe? And where are the servants? Where is everybody? The whole place is deserted. We are quite alone in this huge palace. I am frightened, I tell you. I'm sure there's danger."

"No, Shahu, there is no danger now."

"There is. Oh, I feel it in the air! . . . I saw

the Temple of Kali smoking. Smoke rising up, brown, coiling smoke, the smoke of sacrifice. You know what that means?" His white round face came close to hers. "It is a warning that one of the family of the Prince will die."

"Shahu, do be reasonable. . . ."

He paused, his forehead wrinkled with anxiety. Then his face cleared.

"I know. I shall go to the Resident."

"No, Shahu. That you will not do."

"Yes. I'll go to the Resident. We can take refuge in the Residency till it's safe."

"Shahu! You, a Kshatriya prince, dare to suggest such a thing?"

"Yes, yes. The Residency . . ."

"Shahu!" She took him by the shoulders. He turned his head aside, avoiding her eyes. "Shahu, do you realise what you are doing? What will the people think? What will the soldiers say—they who've been risking their lives for us—when they hear that their Prince ran like a rat and hid in the shadow of a foreigner?"

"I don't care. . . . Leave go of me. I'm going now. At once—d'you understand?"

She began to speak very slowly, trying to appear calm. "Shahu, the Resident must know nothing of this. If only you'd stop for a moment and think, you'd see that what I say is reason-

able. You see, he may order an enquiry. There may be trouble up at Simla. As things are, we can pretend that there was only a petty riot, nothing more. But if you escape to the Residency everyone will know that something serious did occur, and the Central Government may insist on an enquiry by British officials. And then, supposing they find that Princess Indira is dead, after an unsuccessful intrigue? Our enemies will say we murdered her. Our enemies may stage-manage a big outcry against us and the British officials may believe *them* and not us. You may be deposed, Shahu, and an English official appointed administrator of the State. Perhaps our Chandu may never come to the throne. . . .”

She pleaded with him, her big eyes swimming with tears. But he shook his head, panting like a wild creature.

“Let me go, I tell you.”

“No, Shahu. . . .”

He struggled to push her away. His puffy face was distorted with terror. Hideous, hideous, close to hers. His hot breath was fetid. . . .

He threw his weight against hers and she staggered back against the wall.

And there beside her was one of the Lion Men, a toy sword clenched in yellowing claws.

"Shahu, for the last time I beg of you, only be reasonable—try to think calmly and you will see that it is impossible——"

"No. . . . No, I don't want to listen to you any more. I'm going to the Residency."

Suddenly she screamed with rage. She was blind, unseeing, helpless in a gust of elemental fury. Beside her glittered the toy sword of the Lion Man, a tall white lily glowing in the darkness, mesmerising her. She stared at it, her eyes dilating with the passion of a growing resolve.

But it was no longer beside her. It was in her hand. She felt the hilt, deliciously hard, gripped in her hot palm. Red waves of torchlight ran along the blade.

His face hovered before hers, a white and meaningless blur, a balloon bobbing vaguely.

She screamed and ran forward.

"Usha! . . . Usha!" He stumbled back. His back was against the balcony rail. He flung up his arms before his face. There was a crash of splintering wood. The balcony rail bent and parted behind him, and he fell back and down into the courtyard.

. . . What have I done? Oh God, what have I done? But I never struck him. Yet he lies there



so still—crumpled up—motionless. And something has happened to his head. The face is unrecognisable, there is blood and a pale froth of brains.

She heard a footstep in the passage.

It was Nana Saheb.

“Nana Saheb, look what has happened. I never touched him. I swear I never touched him.”

But Nana Saheb’s eyes fell upon the sword in her hand and his eyebrows rose.

“Yes, Nana Saheb, we had a quarrel and—somehow I snatched this sword from the Lion Man—look! it is only a toy sword—I can bend the blade with my fingers. I could not have hurt him with it. But he staggered back and the balcony rail gave way. And he fell. . . .”

She broke into hysterical sobbing.

Nana Saheb nodded gravely.

“Yes, Maharani Saheb, I see that. His Highness has fallen, and”—he peered over the edge of the balcony—“it is evident that he is dead. The back of his head must have struck against the rim of that fountain.”

“But, Nana Saheb, what will happen? What will people say?”

“People will be very sorry at the death of their esteemed Raja.”

"Won't they say that I . . .?"

"No, no. . . . Who would entertain such a wicked idea? It is impossible."

"Oh, Nana Saheb, I'm so unhappy. What shall I do?"

"If I might venture to suggest, Maharani Saheb, if the young Yuvraj——"

"Yes, Chandu, my son, I must see him. Where is he?"

"I had been bold enough to tell the servant to bring the young Prince to you. I thought he might distract your thoughts. They have just gone into Your Highness' room."

"Oh, thank you, thank you. . . ."

"I am happy to inform you that the city is quite normal again. We have arrested all the ringleaders. And to-morrow——"

But she was not listening. She ran down the passage muttering, "Chandu, my son. . . ."

Nana Saheb watched her go.

Suddenly his thin mouth parted in a soundless laugh, his agate eyes glittered with merriment.



Nana Saheb jolted home in his carriage. People had begun to gather in the streets again, soon forgetting their panic. The wind was rising

steadily. Carpets stirred along the balconies, palms rustled drily overhead, the dust rose in electric eddies. The smell of rain was in the wind.

Nana Saheb sniffed contentedly the cool, moisture-laden air. A lovely cleansing storm is coming. That will be the end of the October heat. And afterwards will come the cold weather, frosty, misty mornings and evenings aromatic with wood-smoke.

Everything had passed off excellently. He nodded to himself, stroking his bony chin. The shooting was over in a minute. No one will know what really happened. If there are enquiries we'll say there was a petty riot (suppressed by a baton charge) that started over a dispute concerning the collection of land revenue. And it was inspired by Congress agents. The Central Government can hardly blame us for using severe measures if we prove it was all a Congress demonstration. We shall induce a few of the rebels to say that they were bribed by the Bombay Congress Committee to start trouble in the city. And we'll issue a general amnesty to-morrow to those still under arrest—since by then all the really dangerous prisoners will have been executed and their bodies burnt in the jail.

Ah, here we are—his carriage drew up at the door of his house. His sons came out, kicked off their sandals, touched the ground in front of their father's feet.

"Well, Bal, my boy. Did you play football this afternoon? . . . Good, good. . . . And about those boots. Get yourself a couple of pairs. And some shorts and English shirts. Get them from the best store in Poona. Tell my clerk how much money you require."

"Oh, Father! . . ."

"There, there. That's quite all right. Mind you get into the football eleven now, after I've provided you with all the equipment. And you two other boys—what would you like? Eh? Think it over and tell me."

They went to the dining-room, squatted down on their wooden stools, and ate a frugal meal of milk and salted rice.

Afterwards Nana Saheb retired to his study.

Ah, well, a trying day. He leant back against the bolster and yawned. But all has happened for the best. . . . It's as well the new Raja is so young. . . . The Regency will last my time. . . . And now for the page of Kautilya that I didn't have time to finish this morning. The events of to-day will come in nicely as an illustration to my notes on sedition.

But he couldn't concentrate. Something was troubling him. Yes, yes; the old *gosain*. It was bad to have to give that order. A priest, a Brahman.

Presently he felt a bug moving along his thigh. He pulled up his *dhoti*, caught the little creature and lifted it carefully, tenderly, between finger and thumb. The tiny, plump atom pulsed against the ball of his thumb. He carried it to the window and flicked it away into the night.

"Go little creature, and venture not into men's houses. An unwary sandal may crush you."

He stood for a moment at the window. The wind was blowing warm and strong. The palms leaned and bowed before it, their leaves hissed and rattled. When the wind momentarily abated the palms rose to their full height, strained against the sky, seemed to tug at their roots. The world was full of feverish life. And the clouds raced overhead in serried ranks. . . . But down there in the garbage at the foot of the wall one tiny creature waddled softly amid rotting paper and warm dust. I have saved its life. There is one infinitesimal drop added to the pool of my merit.

. . . But he will be lying there in the gorge,

that old *gosain*; his body huddled in the wet sand, his white, straggly hair adrift in the shallow water at the river's edge. In the early dawn the crocodiles will find him. . . . Well, he should not have meddled in politics. . . . But I suppose I must do a penance. Anyway, a pilgrimage to the shrine of Parashuram at Chiplun, the holy city of my caste. I ought long ago to have made a pilgrimage there; it is years since I have done so. And he thought of that marvellous rose-red temple rising from a grove of whispering palms, overlooking an inlet of the sea. Down there the water is milk-white, unruffled in the evening calm. Thatched, white-walled cottages line the shore. The smoke of evening meals rises in blue spirals, eddying in the air. An Arab dhow is anchored a few yards from the shore. . . . And in the temple darkness shines the silver mask of Parashuram flanked by the marble images of Love and of Death.

For to this hill came Parashuram, the God-Brahman in whom Vishnu was incarnate. He had, in three pitched battles, destroyed the Rajput clans, and had brought upon himself the blood-guilt that defiles the Brahman and outcasts him from his fellows. And Parashuram said to himself, "I cannot mingle now with my fellow Brahmans, but I will create a new caste

of Brahmans that shall be subtler and wiser even than the old, and shall have lordship over mankind." And he lifted his eyes and saw rolling in the surf at his feet the corpses of fourteen fair-haired barbarians. Their ship, whose prow was fashioned like a dragon, had foundered upon the rocks at the estuary's mouth. And Parashuram called out, and the dead men rose up out of the surge of the sea and came and knelt at his feet. So he called them his sons. And they were the ancestors of Nana Saheb's caste. Which is why they are fairer than other Hindus. Who were those fair-haired barbarians and of what nation? No one knows. The ahistoric Hindu mind has never concerned itself with such questions. Were they Achaean sailors blown southward on the calamitous return from Troy, or a lost company of the People of the Sea whom Rameses broke and scattered? No one knows. But the god, his face hidden by a mask of beaten silver, gazes fixedly out over the sea, and his pale-skinned children, with their long Akhnaton heads and strange agate eyes, bow shaven foreheads to the dust before his altar.

Yes, nodded Nana Saheb, I must go on pilgrimage to Chiplun.

But his reverie was interrupted. His eldest son knocked at the door.

"Father, the Resident Saheb wants you on the telephone."

"Yes, good evening Saheb; yes, this is Nana Saheb speaking."

"I say, I've been trying to get through to you for ages. I say, what's all this rumpus in the town? Everyone says there's been rioting and shooting and God knows what."

"Saheb, these people exaggerate too much. There was a little demonstration, got up by Congress men—we have the signed confessions of some of the misguided fellows—to protest against the new rates of land revenue. The police, acting with almost superhuman restraint in face of the grossest provocation, charged with light bamboo canes and dispersed the crowd."

"But what about shooting?"

"Saheb, the police fired a few volleys over the heads of the people as a warning; and then, when they grew more menacing, the police dispersed them with canes . . . and, of course, Saheb, there have been some fireworks and *feux de joie* fired by the palace guard in honour of the Durbar, because to-day is a very holy and auspicious day in the Hindu calendar, and all Hindus——"



"Yes, yes, I know, Nana Saheb. It's all right so long as nothing serious happened. I was getting worried by all these rumours. You never can believe a word you hear in India, can you? Well, good night Nana Saheb; sorry to have bothered you."

The Resident hung up the receiver.

"I thought so. Nothing at all. These servants really are the limit. I shall dock their pay if they do this sort of thing again. The butler was simply gibbering with terror. Really quite put the wind up me. I thought there must be serious trouble, even discounting half what he told me. A friend of his friend's friend had told him—you know how they go on."

"I do indeed," sighed his wife.

"And then I ring up Nana Saheb and find it's all a false alarm. That's what I like about that old chap, Nana Saheb. Never panics. Always cool as a cucumber. Knows what's going on and tells you straight out. Decent, unsophisticated sort of chap. But clever in his own way. And when I ask him what's all the fuss about, he tells me that it's only an ordinary Congress demonstration that got beaten up by the police."

"How dull," said Phyllis. "I *had* hoped there really was something thrilling happening."

"I'm damned glad it wasn't anything serious. I should have had to write reams of reports if it had been."

A servant brought a tantalus of whisky.

"Yes, a nightcap I think. You drinking anything, Dorothy? How about you, Phyllis? I should have a little whisky if I were you. Admirable tonic after a hot day. Gosh, it's been hot to-day! But we're going to have a storm. Tomorrow'll probably be very pleasant. Wonderful how a storm clears the air!"

Branches rattled against the lattice-work of the verandah. The first heavy drops of rain drummed on the corrugated iron of the roof.

"Who's got the *Tatler*? Ah, here we are. Did you see this show, *Harlem Belle*, before you came out, Phyllis? Good, wasn't it? All the reviews praise it. Seems to have a pretty snappy chorus. Ah, well, furlough next year. Not long to wait. We must have a spree in London, Dorothy."

He smiled to himself. London at night. The pavements are streams of watery gold. Taxis throbbing in traffic-blocks, chugging down shining streets, the puddles leaping under their white-rimmed wheels. Women hurry past, heads bent against the wind and furs clutched tight. Slim icicles of silk-sheathed legs. Innumerable omphaloi of sleek umbrellas, bobbing like dol-

phins under the soft waves of rain. And the theatres . . . Pity Dorothy is looking so pulled down. She used to be a handsome woman. London'll brighten her up. . . . And then we'll take a cottage in the country. Lord, I can almost smell the flowers in the garden on summer evenings. If only the school fees for those two young rascals of mine weren't so high, I'd retire now. Retire and have a little house somewhere near the Cotswolds, where there'd be riding and some rough shooting. From the windows you'd see rolling hills and pines and grey-stone cottages.

The chaplain was smiling to himself too. "London," he said softly, his lips parting. "London at night. It's fascinating, isn't it? A witches' cauldron."

Blurred, brutal faces with shaded eyes; jerseys tight over gorilla chests; rakish caps and sinisterly tilted homburgs; Jew-boys in ox-blood suits—all in the mephitic fume of yellow mist and coiling smoke and steam of crowded coffee-stalls. On the ramparts of the roaring streets electric night-signs twitch and glitter; anvil-echoing vaults, blazing with the spoil of Nofer's argosies, ocean-plunder of King Proteus. High white turrets, serene above the Park's bronze-gleaming trees, are Lagid galleys moving swan-

winged over the waters of Cydnus, remote from the murmur of the Agora and glowing with the anemones of Adonis.

"Yes," said the Resident briskly, "I must write to Grindlays' about reserving our berths."

Mrs. Hilton turned to Somervell. "You won't be getting leave, I suppose?"

"No, I'm afraid not a hope."

She leant back, feeling suddenly cold. It was inevitable, but she had carefully, obstinately avoided thinking of it. Not to see him again for so long, and by the time we return he may have been transferred to some other station. . . .

But she mustn't think of that. There were her two sons. She looked up at their silver-framed photos on the piano. The two delicate fair boys in white flannels. She must save herself for them. Be young and jolly, so that they look on her as a friend. Join in their games, know all about the things they were interested in. And be smart and well-dressed or they'd be ashamed of her before their friends. . . . Their friends would come to tea; eat boiled eggs and thick bread and butter, and shout and laugh together. And she'd sit at the head of the table and smile and pretend to be interested in all the school gossip. But never think of that dull ache in her heart. Never close her eyes and remember a slim, tall man

who had once danced with her to a rasping gramophone on the verandah of an Indian bungalow.

The rain was falling hard now. The palace courtyards were lakes of streaming water. The torches in their niches spluttered and flared smokily or sank to glowing smoke. Men crouched in doorways, drew their heavy cloaks over their heads.

And Princess Usha stood at the balcony of her room with Chandu in her arms. Rain! Rain! her heart sang within her, wash the past away! When gusts of water-laden wind blew in her face, she laughed, happy as a child. Somewhere in the palace Shahu was lying on a freshly cow-dunged floor, bathed and anointed, swathed in clean linen. But she would not think of him. He was of the past. Her childish, passionate mind was fixed ecstatically on the future with all the absorbed concentration of the Indian. She had forgotten her terror, forgotten her distress, forgotten the picture of Shahu lying crumpled up by the fountain. All that had happened was over, was an old story, impersonal and shadowing. All that mattered was that Chandu lay in her arms, that they were safe and free and the future stretched before them, rosy with hope.

Rain, rain, wash the past away. To-morrow will be cool and sweet and clean. To-morrow the young gummy buds will be bursting on the rain-pearled trees whose branches will shine amber-brown in the morning air; and the grass will shine with dewy webs, lying like a bloom upon the shrill new green; and all the air will be full of the noise of falling water, splashing from roof to wall and rustling over speckled stones; and the hills against the sky will be blue as pansies with lotus-cups of sunlight nestling in their shadowy glens. And to-morrow a new life will begin for me and Chandu. I shall sweep this palace clean of the debris of centuries. I shall expel the dancers and the singers, the eunuchs and the slaves and the sacred sodomites. I shall clear away the accumulated rubbish, the masses of old furniture, the rotting curtains, the endless ornaments and those horrible Lion Men. I shall have it repainted and refurnished and equipped with a few efficient servants. Then it will be a proper home for us. And Nana Saheb and I will rule this State. He is wise and faithful to me. We will tame the feudal lords, reorganise the administration of the Durbar, bring in new and honest judges from Bombay. Oh, I shall leave Chandu a State without a rival in all the land.

The child stirred drowsily in her arms. She

looked down at him. How beautiful he looks! He will grow up strong and tall and fair, an Aryan prince, eminent in India.

Through a breach in the phalanx of storm-clouds for a moment shone the moon. The topaz in the tawny hair of Shiva.

THE END







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